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OR,
**How Tom Hildreth Run the
Rascals Down.**

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LUKE," "GILBERT OF GOTHAM," "BLUE-
GRASS BURT," "SILVER MASK," THE
"BROADWAY BILLY" STORIES, ETC.

CHAPTER I.

SOMETHING OF A DILEMMA.

A DISMAL night in mid-winter.
Franklin Deepwood, station-agent at Law-
renceburg, was seated in his office awaiting the
arrival of the Night Express, due at eleven
o'clock.

A storm was raging without, and the snow

MARTHA SWUNG THE LANTERN FRANTICALLY; THEN THERE WAS A BLINDING FLASH AND A
LOUD REPORT, FOLLOWED INSTANTLY BY A SHARP SCREAM OF THE WHISTLE.

went whirling past the window and around the corner of the station in blinding clouds, while the wind caused the telegraph wires to moan and sigh dismally, as under its influence their vibrations resounded through the building like the tones of a solemn funeral dirge, or the wild, Æolian music of some mighty harp.

The agent was a man about twenty-eight years of age, of medium size, and of good appearance. He was good-looking, and was pleasing of address and complaisant in manner.

Lawrenceburg was a town of considerable size, and Franklin Deepwood's duties were anything but light. With the exception of the second Tuesday night in every month, however, when he had to remain at his office until eleven o'clock to receive money from the Night Express for the Lawrenceburg Bank, he saw pretty good times.

It is of one of these occasions we write.

The young man was seated with his heels up on his desk and with his back toward the glowing stove, drawing solitary consolation from an old briarwood pipe and sending clouds of smoke floating upward to the ceiling, and as he watched the hands of the clock in their slow and steady round he was picturing bright scenes for the future.

"Whew! what a night!" he presently exclaimed, as he roused up and glanced toward the window. "I am afraid I shall have to stay here pretty late to-night, for the train can never make time in such a storm."

Removing his feet from the desk, he reached over and rattled away for a few moments at the telegraph key, received a reply, and assumed his former comfortable position.

"Thirty five minutes late at Bloomington," he observed to himself, "and that means an hour late here. The train is losing time right along. I have doubts about its reaching its destination to-night."

The storm raged with unabated fury, and the snow dashed against the window in great, ghostly clouds that were gone in an instant, leaving the darkness without deeper and blacker than before, while the station shook and rattled to its very foundation beneath the unseen power of the storm-king.

It was nearing the hour of eleven, and Deepwood had just refilled his pipe and settled down for another smoke, when suddenly there came the sound of heavy footfalls upon the platform, followed immediately by a loud rap at the door.

"Hallo!" the agent exclaimed, bringing his feet down in haste from the desk to their proper level, "here is some one to take the train."

The hour being so late, he had locked the outer door, for the station usually closed at eight o'clock, but hurrying out into the waiting-room, he turned the key and threw the door open.

No thought or suspicion of danger had entered his head, so his surprise can be imagined, when, on opening the door, two masked men sprang in upon him and bore him quickly to the floor.

The attack was so sudden that he had no chance for defense.

"We don't mean to kill you, young man," one of his assailants assured, as he forced a gag into his mouth, "but we do mean business, and it won't do you any good to try to resist us. If you don't try to cut up any funny tricks, all will go well with you."

As they had already bound him, it was not likely that he would be able to resist or cut up funny tricks.

The two men lost no time in their work, for they evidently realized that they were likely to be interrupted at any moment by some person or persons who might come to get aboard the late train.

They had shut and locked the door again, at once, and now, lifting the helpless agent, they carried him into his office, where they placed him upon a low stool and bound him to it so that it was almost impossible for him to move. This done, they put him back into a corner out of the way.

"There you are!" remarked the one who had spoken before, "and you are as safe as a railroad tie in cold weather. It is not likely that you will interfere with our little game."

"No. I should say not, seeing the way he is trussed up," laughed the other.

"And the night is so bad, and the hour already so late, that I do not fancy we shall be interrupted by any passengers."

"Hardly likely. Still, we must be on the safe side in case any one should happen around."

The agent tried hard to recognize one or both of these men, but failed to do so. They were completely masked, as stated, and they, no doubt, were taking good care not to speak in

their natural tones of voice. If they were known to him, this was undoubtedly the case; but there was another view of the matter, and that was that they were men whom he had never seen before.

One of the two turned down the office lamp until it was quite low, and removed the agent's lantern from under the table to a place behind the coal-box, where its light could hardly be seen—changes that left the office very dimly lighted.

At first Deepwood thought it was their intention to rob the office, but he presently had reason to change his mind.

The one who seemed to be the leader of the two took the agent's hat and overcoat down from their places, and stepping out into the darkened waiting-room, threw off his own and put them on.

This done, he stepped back into the office, the mask still on his face.

"You see I have changed my appearance a little," he observed. "I guess it will be easy for the train hands to mistake me for you, Mr. Agent."

Deepwood realized that this was only too true. In the haste and darkness, it would be the easiest thing in the world for this man to pass for him, and no one would be likely to suspect the cheat.

And, too, like a flash came the revelation of what it was their intention to do—they evidently intended to receive the expected money from the messenger on the train and get away with it!

The whole plan was clear to the unhappy young agent. They were to personate him in receiving the money! He even suspected who one of the men was, though he knew that he might be mistaken. Only that afternoon he had received a telegram, addressed to the Lawrenceburg Bank, saying that sixteen thousand dollars would be sent by the Night Express, and that telegram, in the absence of the president, to whom it was addressed, had been delivered to the cashier, Clifford Fairweather.

Whether either of these men was Clifford Fairweather, or not, he could not be sure, but this was the person he suspected one of them of being. Whether it was he or not, the idea of their plan was the same. They had learned of the large sum of money that was expected, and were on hand to receive it.

The agent was in a sad dilemma. If these confederates succeeded in carrying out their scheme, it would place him in a very ugly situation. He would be found, next morning, gagged and bound. He would tell his story, but who would believe it? The messenger on the train would swear that he had delivered the money to him, and to no one else, and how could he prove that this was not so? Detectives would jump at once to the conclusion, perhaps, that it was all a clever trick—that he was the real robber, and that he had had an accomplice to tie him up thus in order to give weight to his story. This might not be the outcome, but these thoughts ran through the young man's mind. There would not be any positive proof against him, but his position and reputation were certainly at stake.

"Do you guess our little game?" one of the men presently asked.

The agent nodded that he did.

"Then it is not necessary for us to explain," was the comment. "We want your money-book. Where is it?"

There was little need to ask this question, for the book lay there on the table, with several money packages in it, all ready to be signed for by the messenger on the train.

The man took it up and looked it over, taking care not to disturb the order in which the packages were arranged, and observed:

"This is just what I wanted. Disguised as I am, it will be the easiest thing in the world for me to exchange moneys with the train messenger, giving him these paltry sums and taking in return the thousands he has for this station to-night."

Deepwood noticed that this man had two manners of speech. Sometimes he would speak as an ignorant person, and again with perfect correctness. There was but one explanation: He must be a man of fair education, for it would be easy enough for such a person to try to imitate the manner of speech of an ignorant person, but it would be impossible for an ignorant person to speak correctly, at pleasure—which only served to strengthen the suspicion mentioned.

"How is the train to-night?" asked the other of the two, for it was now about time for it to arrive.

Of course the agent could not reply, being gagged.

"How do you suppose he is going to answer you?" the other demanded.

"That's so; but he can nod his head. Is she ten minutes late?" addressing Deepwood.

The agent nodded.

"Is she any later?"

Another nod.

"How much later? Is she twenty minutes late?"

"Yes," was the nodded reply.

These questions and answers might have gone on for some time, but the man hit upon another plan. Putting his finger on the face of the clock, he said:

"Now, I'll run my finger around here, and when I come to the hour that you expect the train to get here, you just nod your head."

So saying, he ran his finger around the face of the clock, slowly, expecting the nod at every moment, but it was not given until his finger had gone all the way around.

There was no reason that the agent could think of why he should withhold the information that the train was an hour late, so he gave it.

"What!" cried the other, "do you mean to say the train is that late?"

The agent nodded that such was the case.

One of the men gave a long whistle.

"That is something that we had not thought of," he complained. "We will need all the time we can get to put miles between ourselves and this town before daylight."

Frank Deepwood weighed every word. Were they strangers, after all? and had they come from some distant place, having in some manner or other learned of the large sum of money expected that night? He could not settle the question to his satisfaction. It was possible that these words had been dropped merely as a blind.

It made little difference, one way or the other. The main idea was that he was in a desperate situation, and he must think of some way to get out of it if possible; or at least of some means of foiling the rascals in their scheme.

CHAPTER II.

MODEL YOUNG MEN.

CLIFFORD FAIRWEATHER, as we have seen, was the cashier of the Lawrenceburg Bank. He was about thirty years of age, and the son of the president of that institution. He was educated, moved in the best society of the town, and had some pretensions to good looks. He was proud and overbearing in manner, however, and had few friends among his associates.

There was only one person in the bank, among those whose positions were lower than his own, with whom he was on intimate terms. That one was Robert Bitherford, the head clerk, who was of about the same age as the cashier, and their natures were very much alike. Both were pretty fast in their manner of living, and a close observer would have guessed that they lived up to the full limit of their salaries, if they did not even go beyond.

Robert was the son of one of the bank's directors who was quite wealthy, and Clifford being the son of the president, as stated, their manner of living was not considered above their station, so no one paid any attention to whether they lived beyond their incomes or not.

We say no one, but we must make exceptions. The exceptions were the fathers of the two young men. In their younger days they had been poor and they knew the value of dollars and cents full well. It was their desire to have their sons grow up into the same useful knowledge, and for that reason they limited the allowances of the young men to the exact amount of their salaries, which were not over large.

To young men with an unhealthy fondness for wine, cards and fast horses, this was particularly galling, and having the funds of the bank in their own hands, in a manner, it is not to be wondered at that they made little or no effort to resist the temptation thrown in their way.

The salary of the cashier was one hundred and twenty dollars a month, and that of the head clerk an even hundred. These sums were not over large, as compared with the salaries given in some of our city banks, but the amount would have been princely to young men of stronger moral habits and less extravagant tastes.

On the afternoon that preceded the night of which the opening chapter of our romance treats, these two young men were at their posts in the bank, and it was near the hour for closing.

The cashier was standing idly at his window, having nothing to do at the moment, and the

head clerk left his place and stepped over to him.

When Clifford looked up he noticed that the face of his friend was somewhat pale.

"What is the matter, Bob?" he asked.

"Matter enough," was the reply, in a low tone.

"So I should think, to judge by your face."

"Do you know that the funds of this bank are over seven thousand dollars short at this present hour?"

"I had an idea that they were running a little behind," was the cool reply, a cunning smile lighting the cashier's face as he spoke.

"How are we to make it up?"

"Why do you trouble your head about that? There will no doubt be some way out of it; and if not, our fathers will never expose us, if it has come to their ears. It will teach them that we cannot live without money, and they will increase our pay."

"I wish I could take it as coolly as you can. Here we have been dipping into this money for a long time, keeping our secret well by making our books tally at every examination, and see what the amount has reached!"

"Well, don't let it worry you. If we get a streak of luck we can square the account; and if not, and the worst comes to the worst, we will make a private confession to our dads, and it will be all right."

"I am not so sure of that. I would not have my father find it out for all the money the bank is worth."

"You are too chicken-hearted by half. You do not want to get weak enough to let the cat out of the bag, or it will not go well with you, that I can tell you. I am in no hurry to have it known any more than you are."

"I thought so. But it will be known, and that next month. You know there is to be a general examination, and every cent in the bank will have to be trotted out for inspection. This amount is short in the account of cash on hand."

"Oh, well, a doctored note or two will carry us over that all right."

"Then it must come to forgery, too, must it?" the head clerk gasped.

"A little expert penmanship will not amount to much, now that we have gone so far," was the heartless response.

"I wish we had never taken the first step."

Youthful reader, whoever you are, beware of the first step in sin. The first lie told will demand a dozen more to support it; the first theft will call for other thefts and lies to hide it; the first oath will pave the way for others, and before you know it you will have a chain around you that you will find it impossible to break. Beware of the first step, and you are safe.

"Well," was the return, "it is too late to wish that. The only thing to be done is to make the best of it as it is, and keep it a secret till we get out of it."

"But can you not see some way out of it now? Is there no way in which we can get hold of the money to make good the deficit?"

"You can rest assured that I am on the lookout for some such opening, but until I find it I am not going to worry myself to death about the matter. It will all come out right one way or another."

"I certainly hope it will, but it is a bad fix to be in. Well, I will leave it all to you, since it was you that led me into the crooked business, and I will try to keep the books in tally with your account. But, do not let us allow the hole to get any bigger."

"I shall have to make it a hundred dollars bigger this very day," the cashier answered. "Do not let that interfere with your appetite, however."

Robert Bitherfurd turned away with a groan. While he was equally guilty with the cashier, he certainly felt the crime more deeply, and was more concerned about it. Like the cashier, too, he would stop at nothing, when it came to the pinch, to clear himself of the crime, though he felt the crime more keenly.

At that moment, little Tom Hildreth, the telegraph messenger from the station, came running into the bank with a telegram in his hand.

"Where is the president?" he demanded.

"Here is a telegram for him."

"The president is out," the cashier explained; "let me have it."

"It is all the same to me," declared the boy; "just do your name down here on my book, and it will be all right."

There was no reason why the telegram should not be delivered to the cashier, in the absence of the president, so the boy passed the book in to him, and the cashier signed for it.

The boy went out immediately, and the cashier tore open the envelope and read the message it contained, as he felt he had a right to do, being the president's son.

It was a telegram from a bank in a neighboring city, and read as follows:

"PRESIDENT LAWRENCEBURG BANK:—

"Sixteen thousand dollars by Express to-night, FIRST NATIONAL BANK."

When he had read the telegram the cashier took it and laid it on his father's desk, and for the time being thought no more about it.

The hour soon came for the bank to close, and Clifford Fairweather and Robert Bitherfurd set out for their homes together. Neither of the young men had much to say on the way. Clifford was busy with a new thought that had suddenly come into his brain, and Robert was brooding over the old thought of their dangerous position. They had carried on their dishonest work together, and one was as deep in the mud as the other was in the mire—as the saying has it.

"Come, Rob," the cashier presently exclaimed, "you want to put a more cheerful look on your face than that. You are carrying a hang-dog expression that is enough to lead any one to read your secret. Brace up."

"It is easy enough for you to say brace up, but you do not seem to feel this thing as I feel it. You evidently have less fear of your old man than I have. If I could see my way out of the mess I might be able to appear more cheerful."

"Well, cheer up, then, for I think that I can see daylight ahead. If you will lend a hand and give me a little help in a certain little job that has just presented itself, all will be well."

"Ha! what is that?" demanded the head-clerk, looking up eagerly.

"Did you see that telegram that came in this afternoon, just before we closed the bank?"

"Yes; why, what about it?"

"It was from the First National, and it informed us that sixteen thousand dollars will be sent by Express this night."

"Well, what has that got to do with us?"

"Can't you see?"

"No."

"Then I shall have to enlighten you. The more I think of the thing, the more certain I feel that it is bound to be a success."

"What in the world are you coming at?"

"I am coming at that sixteen thousand dollars."

"I fail to see what you mean. That can do us no good, for as soon as it enters the bank it will be there, and that will settle it."

"That is just the point. If we can get hold of it before it enters the bank, it will place us upon our feet, and more to."

Pale and trembling, the head clerk could only look at his companion in amazement. What could be the idea he had in mind?

"What you are thinking about is utterly impossible," he observed.

"Not so impossible as you may think," assured the cashier. "But, I will part from you here, and will think the thing over. If I see my way clear in the scheme, I will call around and let you into the thing. I shall have to have help, and as it is as much your affair as it is my own, you must make up your mind to follow wherever I lead."

"Well, I am willing to go into anything that will help us out of the present difficulty. I shall expect you."

"All right; and in the mean time just try and see if you can't get rid of that funeral face."

So they parted for the time being, and each went home.

It had been storming all the afternoon, and as night drew on the storm became worse. It promised to be one of the worst nights that winter had seen.

After supper Clifford Fairweather went out of the house, and turned his steps toward the home of his friend.

"Just the sort of a night I could wish for," he mused, as he hurried along. "It is not likely that many people will be out, and my little scheme is bound to work. It will be killing two birds with one stone, too, and will be the best night's work I ever did. We must take care, however, that we do not make a mess of it."

CHAPTER XII.

PLANNING A CRIME.

WHEN the cashier came to the home of his friend and partner in crime, he saw that the parlors of the house were all lighted up, and looking in, saw that a gay and happy group was present. One of Robert's sisters was seated

at the piano, playing, and the young man, with three or four others, stood near her, singing. The older persons of the little company were seated on the other side of the room, and to an observer it would have appeared that nothing but happiness could be found there.

But, Clifford knew better than that. He knew that Robert Bitherfurd was at that moment one of the most unhappy mortals on the face of the earth.

The cashier had to stop for a few minutes and look on, busy with his thoughts.

"It is no wonder that Rob feels his position," he could not help exclaiming under his breath. "It will be a terrible thing for him if exposure comes, and it will about kill the old man. No, it must not be. He must help me in this little game to-night, and then all will be well with us both."

Presently he mounted the steps, rung the bell, was soon admitted, and at once asked for Robert.

That young man greeted him cordially, and the caller was conducted into the parlor.

Clifford knew most of those present, and a few minutes in animated conversation quickly passed; then he turned to Robert and said:

"In such pleasant company, Rob, and who can blame you? I suppose your engagement for this evening has slipped your mind. I would not mention it, but I know that it is important, and that you fully intended to keep the appointment."

The young head clerk knew not what reply to make to this, but the steady gaze of the cashier was upon him, and this helped him to understand that it was necessary for him to fall in with what he had said.

"It had slipped my mind! No, it must not be neglected, and we will set out at once. I am extremely sorry, friends," to the company, "but I have something on hand, an engagement that cannot be broken. I hope you will excuse me."

As those present had dropped in casually, they had no reason to find fault with this, and the young man was graciously excused. His father was the only one who made any inquiry as to the nature of the important engagement, and the ready wit of the cashier came to the rescue.

"We have promised to visit a sick lodge-brother," he explained, "and if necessary, to sit up with him."

"In that case," was the general comment, "you are all the more excusable."

In a few minutes the young men were out upon the street, and were plunging off into the blinding storm.

"You are the very chief of liars," young Bitherfurd complimented, as they walked along. "You have done well so far, but what will you do if it is ever necessary for us to prove where we have been this night?"

"I have taken care of all that. When I shall have told you the plan I have in view, you will see that I have forgotten nothing."

"Well, let me hear it as soon as you can tell me, then."

"I will do so. In the very first place we must arrange for an alibi. To do this we must have a third party in the scheme. The third party is to be Howard Finks. He is a member of our lodge, is sick, and it is true that I was told to visit him. We will go and see him at his boarding-house, and will stay there until a late hour. Howard is one of us in more ways than one, and he will swear that we did not leave him all night, if we want him to!"

"Suppose some one else does see us at another place, though?"

"We must take care of that. But, hear me out: The house where Howard is, is always shut up before eleven o'clock, and the lights are out. We have heard him say so many a time. It will be easy for us to leave there in the dark without being seen, and with his pass-key we can let ourselves in again. He will help us, with the prospect of a hundred dollars or so ahead."

"But," the other objected, "that will be putting ourselves in his hands."

"You needn't be afraid of that. I know a thing or two about him that will be enough to make him keep still. But, now to let you into my plan. That sixteen thousand dollars is to come in on the late train. Deepwood, the agent, will be on hand to receive it. We will go to the station, overpower him, tie him up so that he cannot get loose, and then I will put on his hat and coat and play agent in his stead."

"It can't be done."

"Don't you be so sure of that. I am so confident that it can be done that I shall try it."

"Suppose we are caught?"

"There, that is your style. Why don't you take hold and make up your mind that we will not be caught. It will be one of the easiest things in the world, if no one is there to oppose us. If there is, then we will lay for the agent when he leaves the office, and take it away from him."

"And get a bullet into our vitals, eh?"

"A bullet your grandmother! He will not have a ghost of a chance to defend himself when we jump upon him on such a night."

"Then why don't you take that plan at once, and not the other?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" Fairweather laughed. "I see that you do not catch on to the full meaning of what I am getting at. You do not think of pretty Martha Hildreth."

"What has she got to do with it?"

"Well, your head is thick to-night, and no mistake. You know well enough that Deepwood and I are rivals, and that if I can put this thing onto him in good shape, it will ruin his chances forever."

"I guess that you are right and that my head is thick. I cannot see how our getting away with that money is going to harm him."

"Let me put it before you, then. If we get away with him in good shape, and can leave him bound and gagged in his office, people will think that he has taken the money himself, and has had some accomplice to tie him up that way for effect. It will look reasonable, too. If I can pass myself off for him to the messenger, he will be ready to swear that he gave the money to no one else. This he will stick to, and he will be the first to laugh at Deepwood's story, in order to hold himself blameless."

"What a perfect fiend you are, Fairweather."

"I can't quite agree with you on that point, but I do pride myself upon my ability as a plotter."

"Well, now you have laid all the plans with a view to their success; what if they happen to fail and we get into trouble?"

"But they are not going to fail. In case anything should go wrong, however, we must be determined not to let them capture us nor find out who we are."

"Smarter rascals than we have been taken in."

"Delightful names you like to apply to yourself, truly. If you are fond of them, I am not, and I wish you would not use them any more. We are into this thing for the very purpose of protecting our good names, and if you stand by me, as you must, we are sure to come out all right."

"Oh, I will stand by you, since there is no help for it, and it is worth the risk, of course; but I wish we were well out of it. Here we are at our destination."

They had now arrived at the boarding-house of their friend, and were shown to his room.

Everything seemed to be working together for the success of their evil scheme, for Fairweather had really been appointed by the officers of a secret order to which they belonged, to visit the sick man on this night, though it is not likely that he would have been so earnest in the matter, had he not had some plan of his own to promote. There was not much of the good Samaritan in either of their natures.

Fink was not too sick to promise his help in their plans, though of course he was not allowed to know just what was going on. The promise of two hundred and fifty dollars for his proof of *alibi* won him over, and he did not press to know more than they were willing to tell him.

They could take no further steps until a late hour.

When they left the house they did so in as quiet a manner as possible, without the aid of a light, and their friend carried on the deception of talking to them for a long time after they were gone.

The bank cashier had evidently left nothing unthought of. He now conducted his friend to a stable where he kept his horse, let himself in by a small door in the rear, and soon came out with two rough-looking old hats.

These were particularly needful to them in such a venture as they were about to undertake.

Besides the hats, he had two masks ready for use, and further, he was enabled to find two old overcoats. With these their disguise was bound to be completely successful.

Leaving their own hats and coats there in the stable, they hastened away to the scene of their intended crime.

It was a desperate undertaking for two young men of their standing, but the very daring of the scheme, and the unlikelihood of their enga-

ging in any such venture, were counted on as the very best supports of the *alibi* they would set up, if any suspicion should point to them.

It certainly required desperate courage, but that was what they had. Their other crimes staring them in the face, they were willing to undertake anything to cover them up.

The cashier had talked with more bravado than he had felt. He well knew that if their stealing was known it would mean ruin to them.

They met few people on the streets, and those whom they did meet were as much muffled up as they were themselves, and were forging ahead through the storm with every energy bent upon getting home as soon as possible.

When they came near to the station they saw a light in the window of the office, and approached cautiously to look in and learn who was there. They knew that the agent must be there, but they wanted to know whether he was alone or not.

Going around to where they could command a good view of the office, they saw the agent there alone in the position we have described.

"He is alone," the cashier whispered.

"So I see," was the response of the nervous head clerk.

"And we have the game right in our own hands," the cashier went on. "If we go at it in the right way, there is no reason why we should not make an easy success of it. Everything is in our favor all around."

"Well, let's be doing something, for it is not pleasant to stand here in this storm."

"All right, we will go for him at once, but one word of caution first: We must take care not to let him recognize our voices, and it will be well for us to use a rough manner of speech. Do you catch on?"

"Yes, I understand."

"Come on then, and we will go for him."

Having arranged the further details of their attack, they stepped upon the platform with heavy tread, and the result of their attack has been made known.

CHAPTER IV.

A RAY OF HOPE.

HAVING disclosed the plot that was in progress against the Express-agent, let us return to Frank Deepwood, trussed up in his office and planning how to thwart the two daring confederates.

We have hinted that there was a woman in the case. Such there only too often is, when men stoop to crime.

The woman in this case was young and pretty, one of the few belles of the town in which she lived. Her name has already been disclosed.

Martha was the only daughter of old Dr. Hildreth, whose residence was about two miles out of the town, he having retired from active practice. She had a brother who was an engineer on the railroad, and a still younger brother who was the little Tom Hildreth who has been mentioned as the telegraph messenger connected with the station. Franklin Deepwood had made Martha's acquaintance through her brothers, and spent many a pleasant evening at their home.

Previously to his coming to that station, the young lady had been receiving the attentions of Clifford Fairweather, but that gentleman was now "left out in the cold," so far as her special regards for him were concerned.

Deepwood had won her love, and they were engaged to be married during the coming spring.

The agent had known Philip Hildreth, Jr., for some years, having made his acquaintance at another station on the same road, for engineers generally come to know all the agents along the line of road over which they run; and when he, the agent, was sent to take charge of Lawrenceburg station, he found the Hildreths ready to receive him.

From the very first of their acquaintance, Martha Hildreth had expressed a strong desire to learn the art of telegraphy, and, accompanied by her younger brother, had spent many an hour in Deepwood's office for that purpose.

This younger brother, Tommy, had by this means come to be engaged as messenger.

When Martha was sufficiently proficient in the art to send and receive at a moderate rate, her brother had made her a present of a set of telegraph instruments, and he and Deepwood had erected a line between the station and the old doctor's house.

Under such circumstances it is only natural that she and the agent should learn to love

each other, and the kind of messages that passed over that private line can be imagined.

But, as usual, the course of true love did not run smoothly. Clifford Fairweather was a desperate rival, and he did all in his power to hurt Deepwood's cause, but with little effect.

With these words of explanation, let us return to the agent in his unenviable dilemma.

His two captors were greatly discomfited by the fact that the train was an hour late. It could be plainly seen that they did not like this at all. It was something that they had not figured on. Nor did they try to conceal their disgust.

The more Deepwood saw of them, the more certain he felt that one of them was Clifford Fairweather; and when it was made clear what their intention was, he was more strongly than ever inclined to that opinion. Their rivalry rose up before him, and the whole dark plot appeared before his mind in all its truth. Still, he could not be certain that his suspicion was right.

The most important thing of all was to find some way out of the situation, and that it seemed impossible to do. There was no ray of hope in any direction. It was entirely unlikely that any one would come to take the train, now that the hour of its arrival had passed, and even if there should happen any one along, the disguise of the one robber, clad in the agent's hat and coat, was so nearly perfect that it would no doubt be easy for him to carry it out, if he kept his face as much in the shadow as possible.

What he could do he was unable to see.

While he sat musing, his very soul in deep despair at the thought that he would be found there next morning, bound and gagged, and that his story would be such a wild and improbable one that perhaps no one would believe it, his fingers came in contact with a wire that ran along the wall behind where he was seated.

Instantly a ray of hope flashed into his mind.

The wire was the one that stretched away to the home of his betrothed, and if it were only possible to get at the key under some pretext or other, he might possibly by this means summon aid. Could it be done?

The answer to that thought was soon given. The instruments suddenly began to click, as an operator at another point rattled off a message, and the two men listened to their magic clicking in silence.

When their rattle had ceased, one of the men turned to Deepwood and said:

"I suppose you would like to get your fingers on to that 'ere thing, wouldn't ye," dropping again into the attempt at homely language.

The agent could not very well reply.

"You can set there an' think about it," observed the other. "We know a thing or two about them there masheens, we do, an' you bet we won't let ye git holt of 'em."

Both the rascals laughed, partly in satisfaction at their own cuteness, and perhaps partly at each other's attempt at such an unused manner of speech.

Deepwood glared at them spitefully, and wished that he might get his hands free long enough to lay hold upon a revolver that reposed in a drawer of his desk, while he at the same time kept his brain busy in search of some saving idea.

Suddenly, like a flash of light, that saving idea came, and it was so startling, even to him, that he was half-afraid he would show in his face what was in his mind.

The office was so darkened, however, that that was not likely. His fingers were toying with the wire that ran along the wall behind him, and as he was thus employed the thought came to him that perhaps he could break it.

To those who are not versed in the ways and means of telegraphy, this may be utterly meaningless as a possible way of the agent's helping himself out of his bad situation.

A few words in explanation will make it clear. In operation, the "key" is used to open and close the electric circuit with speed and facility. Taking two ends of the wire and touching them together would answer the same purpose, but this would never fill the active demand of every-day service. If in such a desperate strait as the present, however, the agent could break the wire, he could telegraph with as much correctness, though with less speed, as though he had hold of the key.

At once he set to work to break the wire.

With his hands tied it was not easy to do this, but he had the use of his fingers, and as the wire happened to be of the small copper kind, and uncovered, he had strong hopes of success.

He twisted and turned it this way and that,

with desperate energy, and at last succeeded in breaking it, and as the current was broken the instruments gave a responsive click.

Joy! Now there was hopes of getting help, if— But the thought of being able to get a response from the Hildreth household at this late hour discouraged him at once. Nevertheless he did not hesitate to try, and at once began to call— “M—M—M—M—” the signal of the office at the other end of the little line.

The two men gave their attention again to the clicking of the instruments, this time another set, but as neither of them could understand the mystic language, it amounted to nothing how attentively they listened.

They had no thought that it was the work of the man who was there in the corner, tied fast to his seat, hands and feet. How could they suspect him?

“What is th’ masheen sayin’?” one of them asked.

“How d’ye s’pose he is goin’ ter answer ye, with his mouth tied up like that?” demanded the other.

“That is so; I didn’t think of that. It don’t much matter what it is, though, fer as long as he can’t git hold of it with his hands there is no danger of his calling for help.”

“You are right there.”

It was a great satisfaction to the agent to think how he was working the instruments right under their very noses, and they not aware of it. But it was not such satisfaction to call and not be able to get any answer.

He had little hope that he should get an answer. He had been talking with Miss Hildreth earlier in the evening, and on closing their conversation had bade her good-night, and perhaps she had then cut the instruments out at her end of the wire, in which case it would be utterly useless to call. As he could not know that this was so, he did not give up.

“M—M—M—M—,” he continued to call, but when several minutes had passed and there was no response, he began to despair. At last, however, the current was broken, and back to his eager ears came the more-than-welcome response— “i—i—M—.”

So excited and delighted was Deepwood that he could hardly control his nerves sufficiently to spell out the words he wanted to make use of.

“Thank goodness you are there,” was what he said first, and then, as rapidly as possible, he explained his dilemma to his promised bride and told her what to do.

The railroad ran within a short distance of the Hildreth place, and if Martha could get any one to go out and stop the train there, and tell the conductor and trainmen of the situation, they could be on their guard when the train came to the station, and the rascals could be captured.

“There is no one here,” was the young lady’s reply, “but I will call up Tommy and we will see what we can do.”

Deepwood told her about how late the train was, and at what time it would be along, and no more was said. There was no time to be lost now, and his fate rested with the woman he loved.

With a silent prayer for the success of her mission, and for her safety, the young man could do nothing more, and so leaned back against the wall to await the course of events.

Leaving him there, under the watchful eyes of the two rascals who had him in their power, as it would seem, let us go with Martha Hildreth upon her strange and dangerous mission.

The young lady had been in bed about an hour, when she suddenly awoke, and fancied that she had heard the telegraph instruments at work in the room down below.

She listened attentively.

Yes, she was not mistaken. They were rattling away at a desperate rate, and some one at the other end of the wire was calling her! It must be Franklin. What could he want?

With as much haste as possible she put on her dress and ran down to the room where the instruments were and responded.

Then, with pale and terrified expression of face she listened to what her lover had to tell.

She gave the reply which has been set forth, but no sooner was it done than she dropped down upon a chair in an almost faint.

What could she possibly do? How could she and Tommy stop the train? How could they do anything in such a storm?

CHAPTER V.

STOPPING THE EXPRESS.

FOR some minutes Martha Hildreth sat there in a partly dazed condition, and then she sprang

to her feet. She must do something, and that at once.

Her first thought was of the hired man, but, as luck would have it, he had gone away. As to her father, he was half sick with a bad cold, and it would be useless for her to call him up. Whatever was to be done, depended on her.

There was no near neighbor to call upon, either. The railroad was nearer than the nearest house.

Hurrying back to her room, she dressed herself as soon as possible, in a manner suited to face the storm, and then hastened to the room of her younger brother and called him up.

Tom was a boy about fifteen years of age, and full of youthful fire and vigor.

If Philip, their elder brother, had been at home, there would have been little trouble about the matter, but it so happened that he was the engineer on the very train it was so necessary to stop.

“What is the trouble, sis?” Tom demanded, as he roused up and opened his eyes in a very sleepy manner.

“Hush,” Martha cautioned, “do not say a word, but dress as soon as you can and come down-stairs. Do not make any noise.”

Tom was out of bed in a moment, and soon presented himself below, where he found Martha clad for going out, and saw that she had a lighted lantern in hand.

“What in th’ name of wonders is goin’ on, anyhow?” he demanded, his face a perfect picture of amazement.

“Don’t ask me now,” returned Martha, “but get on your overcoat and cap as soon as you can, and come with me.”

The boy obeyed, making as little noise as possible, and in a few minutes they were ready to set out and brave the storm.

They opened the door and passed out, taking care not to awaken their father or the servant, and Martha then took hold of Tom’s arm and led the way.

“Now,” the boy demanded, when they were clear of the house and yard, “I would like to know where you are goin’, an’ what you are goin’ fur. Are ye goin’ fur a doctor, sis?”

“No, I am not going for a doctor. I am going over to the railroad track.”

“You are goin’ over to th’ railroad track?” in the greatest surprise.

“Yes.”

“What are you going over there for?”

“To stop the Night Express.”

“Stop the Night Express! What in the name of wonder are you goin’ to do that fur?”

“Pay attention and I will tell you. Two bad men have made a prisoner of Mr. Deepwood, down at the station, and have bound him in his office. There is a large sum of money coming on the train, and they intend to get it. We must stop the train and tell the conductor about it so the trainmen can capture the rascals.”

“Whew!” the boy whistled, “that is a startler! But, how did you get hold of it all? Are you sure you didn’t dream it?”

“Of course I am sure. Franklin called me up and told me, and told me that his only hope was in our being able to stop the train here and so get help.”

“It seems to me that you have been dreamin’, sis, sure as you live. If he is tied up as you say, how could he telegraph to you?”

“They happened to place him where he could get hold of the wire with his fingers, and he broke the wire and telegraphed by touching the ends together. It was a clever thing for him to do, with the men there right before him.”

“Well, I should say so. Does he know who the men are?”

“No; but he has a suspicion who one of them is.”

“Who does he think it is?”

“He did not tell me.”

“This beats all the things I have heard of in some time,” Tom declared. “We are not goin’ ter find it any easy job to stop that train, sis, you can be sure of that.”

“Why, if we signal Phil with the lantern he will stop.”

“Yes, if he can see the signal; but on such a night as this I’ll bet the snow is flyin’ round that engine so’s he can’t see at all. I have heard him say that he can’t hardly see when the engine is throwin’ snow.”

“Then what are we to do? We must stop the train in some way or other.”

Thus they talked as they forged ahead through the blinding storm. It was no easy task for them to do. They were risking a great deal as it was to make their way to the railroad in such a storm on so dark a night, but both were

brave and strong, and the importance of their mission lent additional strength to them.

Worst of all, their nearest way lay across a field, where there was no track to guide them, but they were too well acquainted with the neighborhood to lose their way easily. Besides, it was hardly possible for them to lose their way, for the railroad was before them, and they would surely come out upon it at one point or another.

“If we only had a torpedo,” Tom presently suggested, “that would be likely to bring Phil to a stop, whether he could see anything or not.”

“That is true. Do you think it is possible to get one anywhere?”

“There may be some in the shanty of old Dan the track-walker, if we can find that; and it is possible that we can find Dan himself; for he will be likely to keep as close to the shanty as he dare on such a night as this is.”

“That is the very ideal!” cried Martha, with renewed hope and courage. “Come, let us get on as fast as we can, for there is no time to lose.”

“What time is it?” Tom inquired.

“It was half-past eleven when we started.”

“Then the train is late?”

“Yes, an hour late.”

“Good! That will give us a little chance. Push ahead, and you’ll find that you can’t go any faster than I can, sis.”

They hurried forward as fast as they could, under some difficulties, but their speed at the best was not very rapid. It was fortunate that they had no less time than they had.

By the time they reached the second fence that lay in their way Martha was about out of breath, and had to stop there for a few moments to rest.

They soon started on, however, and finally came out upon the track of the railroad.

“Thank goodness we are here at last,” the young lady exclaimed.

“Ditto,” cried Tom; “and now the next thing is to find the track-walker’s old shanty.”

“Do you know in which direction it is?”

“Can’t be sure of it till I kin find some landmark to go by, sis,” was the boy’s reply.

“Let’s find some landmark, then, as soon as we can. There is not a minute to be wasted.”

“Come on; we’ll go this way.”

Tom had a pretty good idea as to where they were, and he now took the lead.

They had not gone far when he came to a sudden stop with an exclamation which proved that he had made a discovery of some sort.

“What is it?” his sister demanded.

“Why, there is the shanty itself,” declared the boy, pointing.

Sure enough, there the shanty stood, and they were scarcely a dozen feet away from it.

Tom stepped forward quickly and tried the door. It was locked.

“Dan is not here,” he announced.

“And is the door locked?” his sister asked, in a voice of alarm.

“Yes, sis, it is locked up tighter than a drum. You just hold on a minute, though, and I’ll get in there.”

Going around to the side, the boy tried the window, and that was fastened, too. But he did not stop there. Taking off his cap he doubled it up over his fist, to serve as a protection against the glass, and dashed his hand through one of the panes.

“There are more ways than one to kill a cat,” he observed, and this is one.

It took him but a moment more to reach within and find the nail that held the sash down, and that removed, the window was easily opened.

“Give me a boost, now, sis,” he requested, “and if there is any fire-works in here I’ll soon have some of them.”

Martha complied, and the boy was soon inside the shanty. Then she handed him the lantern, and he began his search.

While he was thus engaged, the whistle of the train was heard.

“You must hurry, Tom,” the girl cried, “for the train is coming.”

“Let her come,” was the joyous response, “for I have got the thing we wanted.”

He had indeed found a box containing a dozen or so of torpedoes.

It took him only a moment to select two good ones, as well as he could judge of their quality, and thrusting them into his pocket he handed out the lantern and made all haste to follow it.

The thunder of the coming train was now plainly heard, and again the whistle was sounded.

“Hurry, Tom, do hurry!” Martha cried, so

nervous that she could hardly hold the lantern. "Where will you put them?"

"You bring along the lantern, sis," was the firm response, "and I will show you that."

Bounding over to the right-hand rail, as the train would find it in the direction it was coming, the boy hurriedly dug away the snow and clamped on the torpedoes, putting them both together, so that in case one missed fire the other would be on hand to render service. But they were not likely to miss fire. Railroad torpedoes are made to go off, and the writer never heard of one failing to do its duty. If both went off, it would be as one report, so two would signify nothing but *stop!*

"Do you think they will go off?" Martha asked.

"That is what they are made for, sis," was the response; "and now let us go on ahead a little ways, for the train will not stop right on the spot."

They stepped aside from the track and hurried on, and ere long the rumble and roar of the train was near at hand.

Tom looked around, and the reflection of the headlight could be seen through the snow, looking to be as big as a house.

"Here it comes, sis," he cried, and he drew Martha still further away from the track.

"Yes," was the trembling response; "and what if the torpedoes should fail to go off?" But they did not fail.

The train was now quite near. Martha swung the lantern frantically; then there was a blinding flash and a sharp report, followed instantly by a sharp scream of the whistle. The next instant the train dashed past them, a stream of fire rolling from every wheel, and for a moment they were almost buried under the cloud of snow that was thrown upon them by the passing engine.

CHAPTER VI.

A SMART CONDUCTOR'S TRICK.

PHIL HILDRETH, the engineer of the Night Express, was running at as high a rate of speed as possible, anxious to lose as little time as he could, and the clouds of snow that the snow-plow threw up made it almost impossible to see anything outside of the cab.

He had to forge ahead, though, whether he could see or not. The rails were supposed to be there, and if one happened to be out of place, or anything blocked his way—well, he would find it out. All he could do was to keep as good a lookout as the circumstances would permit, and trust the rest to luck.

This is no story-book idea, it is actual experience. Engineers run many and many a mile in heavy snows, without seeing anything but the blinding snow. They know their road well, can measure their speed and distance by guess, and if the "irons" are there to guide them they are safe.

In this manner he was plunging ahead through the dense white darkness—strange combination of terms—when of a sudden there came a bright flash from under the drivers, accompanied by a loud report, and he instantly knew what that meant. It meant danger!

Giving one sharp tug at the whistle-valve, the engineer next reversed his engine and applied the brakes. It was all done in a moment of time.

The train jugged and jolted and groaned under this sudden reversing of the power, and its speed was reduced immediately. In a few moments more it was at a stand.

"What can be the trouble now?" questioned the fireman.

"I give it up," answered Phil, "unless that freight has got stalled ahead of us on the grade."

"She must be mighty late then," the fireman commented.

The freight in question had passed that point two hours previously.

There was no time now to question the probability of what it might be, for, having stopped, it was their business to ascertain as quickly as possible what they had been stopped for.

Down they sprang, engineer and fireman both. Looking around, they presently saw the lantern carried by Martha Hildreth.

By this time the conductor and trainmen were out with their lanterns, and all were eager to learn what the trouble was.

Tom and Martha soon came up, and then the surprise of the engineer, their brother, can be imagined.

"Martha! Tom! what are you doing here?" he exclaimed and demanded in the same breath.

The young lady was so nearly out of breath that the business of explanation fell to Tom.

"There is trouble down at th' station," he

said, "and we have come out to stop you and tell you about it."

Questions and answers were then given in rapid succession, and in a few moments the trainmen were in possession of the whole story.

It was such a strange affair that it took considerable of talking on Tom's part to set it right, but at last it was done, the train was ready to go on.

"Will you go on with us?" asked the conductor, addressing Tom and Martha. "You may get right aboard if you will."

They decided at once that they would, and climbed aboard.

Their mission successfully accomplished, they were naturally anxious to see the end of the affair.

Tom Hildreth got up on the engine with Phil, while Martha entered one of the cars, and the train started upon its way.

Let us return to the station and see how it was with Deepwood.

Having done all he could, the young telegrapher leaned back against the wall. The two men were, by no means talkative, only expressing their impatience by an occasional exclamation.

"Will the time ever roll around?" one of them questioned.

"It seems ter be a long while in gettin' around," was the response.

When the clock pointed to a quarter to twelve the leader of the two left the office and stepped out into the waiting-room, where, in the darkness, he took off his mask and wrapped a long and heavy muffler around his neck and face until nothing remained exposed but his eyes.

This muffler, too, was one that belonged to Deepwood, and it was well calculated to add to the success of the disguise.

When he re-entered the office, Deepwood saw, at a glance, that, unless the men on the train were in some way warned of the trick, the deception would certainly be successful.

How had Martha Hildreth made out? That was a question he constantly asked himself. He had not called her since, for it was of no use. She was out of the house, out in the storm, beyond a doubt, and his anxiety for her safety more than equalled his other doubts and fears.

The time passed and the storm still raged wildly. Every minute seemed an age to the unfortunate agent; but, at last, above the sound of the humming of the wires and the howling of the storm, he heard the whistle of the train.

Then his heart began to beat with the wildest excitement. What was to be the result—for him? If Martha had failed him, then all was lost.

At the first shriek of the whistle the two men sprung from their seats, and the one who was to personate the agent seized the money-book and the lantern and hurried out.

The other man put out the light in the office entirely, and followed, taking his place on the higher part of the platform in the deep shadows, at a little distance from the place where the Express car usually stopped, holding himself in readiness to lend his assistance if required.

In a few minutes the train came thundering up through the storm, the glare of the headlight looking unusually large. In a few seconds the great engine came to a stop, at the station.

There were no passengers to get on or off, and there was nothing to draw attention away from the Express car.

The moment the train stopped the daring cashier stepped forward to the door of the Express-car, tossing the money-book in upon the floor, as he had seen the agents do, many a time, and putting out his hand for the book he had to sign, which was at once handed out to him.

This may seem a strange proceeding, after the warning which had been given, but it is easily explained. The conductor of the train, so confident of his ability to deal with the rascals, with the help of the trainmen, and no doubt the engineer and his fireman, too, had not said a word to the messenger on the train of what was in the wind, and the valuable package was handed out the moment the train came to a stop.

Certainly this was a very foolish proceeding, and was only to be accounted for by the fact that the conductor and the messenger were not on speaking terms, which only served to make it seem more foolish than ever.

So the situation was, however, when the train stopped, and before the conductor and the other men could alight, the money was already in the hands of the very man who should not have been allowed to get hold of it.

No sooner was it in his hands, though, than the trainmen came running forward with shouts,

led by the conductor, and the engineer and fireman were down from their engine to lend assistance in the expected capture.

The clerk of the bank, who, as we have seen, stood by in the deep shadow, was the first of the two to catch on to the meaning of the cries of the trainmen, and he instantly cried:

"They are onto our game, pard; run fer life!"

It took but a single glance for the cashier to assure himself that this was the case, and he let fall the lantern he had on his arm and darted around the station as though in considerable of a hurry.

The other man had already led the way, and after them both flew the engineer, conductor, and others.

As it happened, not one of the pursuers was armed, and all they had to trust in was their legs and arms.

The Express-messenger had a revolver in his car, but, by the time he had overcome his surprise, and had joined in the pursuit, the men were out of pistol range.

If the pursuers were not armed, it was not so with the pursued. They had a revolver each, and when they found that some of the men who were after them were gaining a little, they turned in their flight and fired.

No one was hit, and it is very probable that the men fired in the air, but it had the effect to check further pursuit. None of the party had any desire to get hit with a bullet if he could keep out of the way.

They stopped and turned back, soon meeting the messenger.

"Did they get away?" he demanded.

"Yes," was the reply, "slick and clean."

Then the messenger naturally wanted to know what it all meant, and when he was told, he went for the conductor in great style.

"If you had warned me of it," he declared, wrathfully, "I could have saved that money, even if we did not capture them. A fine mess you made of it, didn't you?"

The conductor blustered around a good deal, but it was plain to all that he was at fault in the matter.

They hastened back to the station, and dashed into the office to learn what the agent could disclose in regard to the identity of the robbers.

Martha Hildreth was ahead of them there, and the agent was already freed from his uncomfortable position.

The agent's first words to the messenger were words of censure, blaming him for letting the money get out of his hands, after the warning he had received. But the censure was soon put where it belonged. The messenger responded that he had not been warned at all, and therefore was entirely innocent in the matter. This rendered it still more uncomfortable for Brynton Oldhouse, the conductor, who made it his business to get his train in motion as soon as he possibly could.

CHAPTER VII.

TOM HILDRETH TAKES HOLD.

WHEN the train was in motion, and had gone some distance, Oldhouse went forward into the Express-car and spoke to the messenger.

"That was rather a bad slip on my part, Robbins," he confessed, "but now that it is done and can't be helped, we may as well come to an understanding about our story of the robbery, so that our yarns will tally."

"There is no need for you to trouble your head about that," was the prompt reply, "for if you tell the truth our stories will tally all right."

"Yes, of course; but we can say that we did all we could to hinder them, you know, and that will help you out of your trouble."

"Indeed! I am in no serious trouble. I shall give the case just as it is. I shall say, too, that if I had been warned by you it would not have happened."

"You want to act pig-headed about the matter, I see. You know that I did not have time to get to your car from the place where we stopped, and I thought I would do the next best thing. I told all the boys to be ready, and we would get hold of the men before they could tell what had happened. How could I know that they would run off almost before we had stopped?"

"That is all right, Oldhouse. You tell what you want to. If it does not agree with my story, you will know why. You could have sent one of the men to tell me, even if you could not come yourself."

The conductor retired from the car, cursing roundly, and stopped in the baggage-car, where

he had a little corner fixed up for his private use.

Going in there, he put down his lantern on the desk, snatched off his cap, and then threw himself down into his chair.

"This is a pretty mess," he growled. "If I had told the messenger, then it would have been all right. I can see that as well as any one. No. I had to try to gain all the glory for myself, and just because *she* was on the train! Now I will figure in a pretty light to claim her favor! Hang it all! what did such a thing want to turn up for anyhow?"

After a little time he started up, thrust his hand into his pocket, and drew out something that flashed in the light of his lantern.

"I almost forgot this," he thought aloud, "and I must see what it is and to whom it belongs, if there is any way in which I can find out. I picked it up there on the platform, near where the two men had first stood, just as the train was about to start."

The article proved to be a watch charm. It was of gold, and on one side were the letters "C. F."

It was an odd and pretty one, and clearly of no little value. He had picked it up, as he said, on the platform. No one had noticed him in the act, and if this was of any value as a clew to the guilty ones, he had it all to himself.

The charm was a locket, one of the square sort, but there was nothing inside of it.

The conductor tried to think of some name to fit the initials, but could not do so—that is, he could not think of the name of any person of whom he had any personal knowledge, nor of any one he had heard of, that would fill out the C. F. The letters might mean Claude Fritz, or anything else, but they did not signify anything to him.

"I give it up," he decided. "Nevertheless, I will put the thing on, and if I ever fall in with its owner it will be sure to attract his attention. That may be the means of my learning who these robbers were to-night. Who can tell?"

No one could tell, of course, and if properly worked, the charm might be the means of his capturing the robbers and so redeeming himself in the eyes of his comrades of the rails.

With these thoughts in his mind, he attached the charm to his own chain, took up his lantern, put on his cap and went into the cars.

As soon as the train had gone from the Lawrenceburg Station, which was just as soon the two Express-agents had settled their business as well as they could in the absence of the sixteen-thousand-dollar package for the bank, the agent, Martha Hildreth and Tom went into the office to talk the matter over and to get warm, for the air there, where it whistled around the station, was anything but balmy.

"It is too bad that plan failed, after all our trouble," observed the young lady, in something of a discouraged tone.

"It would not have failed, had it not been for the smartness of Brynton Oldhouse," declared Deepwood.

"He allus was too fresh," averred Tom, "and if I was big enough I would like to take a fall out of him, just fur luck."

"Hush, Tommy, don't talk so," his sister admonished; "it is rude."

"It would be rude fur him, you can bet on that, sis," was the boy's retort, with a shake of the head. "I have got it in fur him some of these days anyhow, and I would like to see some of th' smartness taken out of him for *this* smart-Alleck trick."

"Well, it might be worse than it is, there is some consolation in that," the agent remarked.

"How could it well be worse?" asked Martha.

"The money is gone, and you are not likely ever to see any of it again."

"That is true," Franklin agreed, "but there is plenty of proof that it was stolen, and that I was in no way a party to it. That was a thought that troubled me not a little at first."

"That is so; but they could not well have charged it to you, could they?"

"They're mean enough ter do anything in these days," cried Tom. "It would be hard fur 'em ter say how you took th' boodle, though, if they found you tied, I think."

"That was just where the danger lay," the agent explained. "They would have said, perhaps, that I had some one to help me, and that that person had tied me up to give weight to the story. I am very thankful that it turned out as it did, since the money could not be saved, nor the thieves captured."

"Now I suppose we will see some of them big city detectives down here, won't we?" suggested Tom.

"It is certainly a case for detective skill," the agent responded, "and I have no doubt the Express Company will put one or more of their experts on it."

"I think I will try a hand at it myself," said the boy, speaking in all earnestness.

"You!" cried Martha.

"Yes, me."

"What do you think you could do?" asked Deepwood, laughing.

"Oh, you can laugh if you want to!" the boy retorted, "but I won't be the first boy that has tried his hand at that sort o' work, an' some of them has come out on top o' th' heap, too."

"Well, I admire your ambition, Tom, but at the same time I honestly think this case will require an older head than yours to unwind it."

"You do, eh? Well, now, it would s'prise ye if I *should* do it, now wouldn't it?" in the same earnest manner.

"Yes, it would indeed," the agent honestly confessed.

"You told me over the wire that you had a suspicion who one of the men was," observed Martha.

"I did?"

"Of course you did. Do you not remember?"

The agent had no doubt in mind when he put his question. He was simply paving the way out of an explanation. The paving was not likely to hold. He would have to explain right out, or else would have to refused to tell at all. He chose to do the latter.

"It is true that I did suspect who one of them was," he acknowledged, "but now that they have escaped, I think it will be better for me to make no mention of that suspicion to any one. I might wrong an innocent man by so doing, and on the other hand, the detectives, if they send any, would certainly blame me for telling anything."

"They needn't know it nuther!" declared Tom. "All you have got ter do is to tell me, since I am goin' ter take th' case up, an' I will work it right up in style, you can bet on that."

"That is all story-book talk."

"It is, is it? Now you wait an' see. There has been greater things than this straightened out by boys no bigger'n me, an' I reckon that there will be a good many more of th' same sort. Anyhow, I am goin' to try my hand at this. Now, here is one clew to start on, right here."

"Right where?"

"Right there—that old coat and hat."

Sure enough! There, on one of the benches of the waiting-room, lay the coat and hat which one of the men had taken off in order to put on those of the agent.

"Right you are," the agent acknowledged; "and that reminds me that I am out a coat and hat, and also a muffler. Bring the things in here and let's look at them."

This was soon done, and the hat and coat were found to be of very little worth. They had evidently been the second-best of some working man, and were of no value to any one but the owner.

"You got the worst of this trade, that is sure," laughed Tom.

"Yes, I should say I did," was the response.

"Well, I have more coats than one, which is some consolation, and I will put these things away for the detectives."

"Don't mean ter give me any show at all, eh?" remarked Tom.

The boy, by the way, had already been through the pockets of the coat, and had found a small account-book, which he had quickly transferred to his own pocket.

Deepwood laughed at him, but put the hat and coat away in a closet, locking them up. Then he hunted up another, for his own use, and in a short time set out to conduct Martha and Tom back to their home through the storm, reaching there after a hard struggle without mishap or accident, and at the urgent request of Dr. Hildreth, who was up and anxious about Martha and Tom, remained the rest of the night there.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE WORK WELL DONE.

THE two rascals who had made such a daring and successful attempt to rob the Express Company did not stop in their flight until they felt sure that they were out of danger.

By that time they were about out of breath, too.

"That was a narrow squeeze," panted Fairweather.

"You are right it was," agreed Bitherfurd, "and we are not out of the woods yet. We

may not get safely back to town, and we ought to be there now."

The railroad was on the outskirts of the town, and in their flight the young men had gone still further out.

"We have more to do than simply to get back to town unseen," declared the cashier. "We are not done with our work yet."

"What do you mean? You have got the money, haven't you? What more do you desire? Do you want the earth?"

"I would not mind having a good slice of it, that is a fact; but the thing I want now is to cover up our trail in this night's work so that no suspicion can possibly point to us."

"Well, haven't we done that pretty well as it is?"

"Yes, so far as that goes; but you must remember that the thing did not turn out just as we planned it. That old hat and coat that I had on are in the station, and I have got on those of the agent. It will never do for me to wear these back to the house, nor will it do for me to go there without any on. I must go back there to the station, and after it is shut up I must get in and leave this rig and take the other."

"If we try that we shall be caught, sure."

"No matter, we have got to run the chances; and then there is another thing I have thought of that has got to be carried out. That done, and we are perfectly safe."

"What is that?"

"We have got to go and get something to eat at Tony Duke's all-night saloon."

"Say, are you crazy entirely?"

"Guess not; why?"

"Then what do you want to show yourself for?"

"To put more backbone into our *alibi*," was the reply.

"If you do not look out you will take out what little there is in it now."

"Do not be afraid of that. Nothing ventured nothing had, you know; and I believe that I was cut out for a first-class rogue."

"We both think alike on that point."

"Thank you; but, come, let's get back."

They started to retrace their steps, or rather to return by another way, for they did not think it well to go back just the way they had come.

It was the roughest night's work they had ever done in their lives. It was bad enough to be out in such a storm, but on such an errand as theirs it was worse.

When they came out in the neighborhood of the station they found that it was all dark, and rightly guessed that Deepwood had gone away for the night.

"Come right on," said the cashier, "and we will lose no time about the matter. There is not likely to be any one here, and if there is we are armed and ready for him. We will do the work as soon as we can and then get away."

"Yes, if we get away."

"Croaking yet, are you? If anything happens to us it will be through you."

"I guess I am as well able to take care of number one as you are."

"Take care of him, then, and come along."

Fairweather led the way and stepped up on the platform with as little noise as possible and advanced to one of the windows.

Bitherfurd followed.

"How are you going to work it?" he whispered.

"I shall break a glass and crawl in," was the answer.

"And get a bullet into you the minute you get in, eh? Now why don't you knock and see if any one is there first? If there is, he will answer to find out who we are; and if no answer, then it will be safe to go ahead."

"There is something in that, sure enough. I will do it."

This agreed upon, the cashier knocked at the door two or three times, but no reply was given. This made it reasonably clear that there was no one there.

"Nobody home," Fairweather remarked; "and now to get in."

Without more ado he broke one of the panes of glass, reached in and opened the window, and leaving his accomplice there on guard, crawled in.

His first act was to go to the place where he had left the old hat and coat, but they were not to be found. This was what he had feared, and a cold perspiration started out upon his face. No doubt they had been put away as clews to the robbery. In that case it was not safe for him and his partner. No telling what would come of such a discovery.

Where had they been put? He must find them if they were in the building at all, and he would search in every corner.

Fortunately he knew the station very well, having lived in that town ever since he was a boy. If there is any point in a town that every citizen knows well, it is the railroad station.

He did not think it well to strike a light, so had to carry on his search in the dark.

When he had felt around in every nook and corner he could find, he thought of the closets.

"Just the place," he thought, and he went for them at once.

Not having any key that would be likely to fit the door, he broke it open with no delay, and there found the things he was in search of.

The discovery was a great relief to his mind, and no time was lost in taking off the garments belonging to the agent and putting on the others.

As soon as the exchange had been made the rascal climbed out through the window and joined his companion, and together they hurried away from the place.

"There is another thing that I have been thinking about that may be the means of getting us into trouble," remarked Bitherfurd, as they forged ahead into the storm.

"What is that, old woman?" the cashier asked.

"Thank you for such complimentary names. I was thinking that if the storm comes to a stop soon, our tracks will be prominent features in the snow when daylight appears."

"There you go, borrowing trouble again. There is little danger in that line. The storm is not likely to stop so soon, and even if it does there will be enough persons out in it before daylight to hide all the tracks we will make."

"Perhaps you are right."

"I know I am. Now we will go to the stable and dispose of these things, and don our own garments, after which we will call around and see Tony Duke, as I said, and get a little something to eat."

The two rascals made their way to the stable we have seen them visit before, and Fairweather let himself in as on the other occasion. Once there, they made all haste to change their coats and hats, this time getting their own, and then they left there and set out for the restaurant the cashier had named.

By this time it was near one o'clock. There were only two or three persons in the place besides the proprietor, and they were taking a late supper.

"Hello!" Tony exclaimed, "you boys are out late to-night. Where have you been putting in the time?"

"Oh," responded the cashier, "we are sitting up with Howard Finks to-night, and feeling hungry we thought we would run around and see what we could find to eat in your place."

"That is good; glad to see you. Call for anything you want, and see how quick I can set it before you."

The two young men stated themselves at a table and made known their wishes, and in a very short time were served.

"I thought Finks was better," the proprietor observed, as he sat down near them.

"So he is," was acknowledged. "I think this will be about the last night that any of the boys will have to sit up with him."

This was said by Fairweather, and Bitherfurd added:

"It will not be long before he will be out and around, I guess."

They took their time at eating, and showed no more excitement than if their story had been strictly true.

When they had done they settled their score and went out, and from there went in all haste to the house from which they had started.

There they let themselves in without making a sound, or, at any rate, as silently as they possibly could, and passed up to their friend's room.

They found him still awake, for one of the features of his ailment was insomnia, and he was wondering whether they would come back again or not.

One thing we have omitted to mention, and it is important. In the stable, after they had changed their hats and coats, they had opened the package of money, and dividing it into four equal portions, as nearly as they could judge by the sense of feeling, had put it away into as many pockets, and by this means were relieved of any package in hand. The wrapper they had carefully preserved, and would burn that at the first favorable opportunity.

"I thought you were never coming," the sick man observed.

"We were detained a little longer than we thought we should be," explained the artful cashier. "And," he added, "we want to impress upon your mind the importance of the promise you made to us. You want to remember that we were here all the evening, and up to near one o'clock, when we went out to get a little something to eat. We were out a little over half an hour. That is what you are to say, and you are to stick to it like grim death. Do you understand?"

This was impressed upon the man's mind so that it would be impossible for him to forget it, and then they all stretched out to get a little sleep.

When morning came Fairweather and Bitherfurd left the house and started for their homes.

Fairweather had occasion to look at his watch as they were on the way, and was horrified to see that the charm was gone from the chain.

"Great Scott!" he gasped, "where is my charm?"

"Have you lost it?" inquired his companion, in as great alarm as his own.

"Yes, it is gone, and I am sure that I had it last night when we set out from your house. Where in the world can it be? I hope it will never be found, but I fear it will be. What in the name of goodness am I to do about it?"

"You will have to grin and bear it," was the consolation he got.

"Can't you help me out of it? Can't you think of some easy way of explaining its loss?"

"You might say that a man made a grab for your watch last night, and tore the charm off."

"Just the thing!" the cashier cried. "We were on our way to Finks's; a man ran up and snatched at my watch; you saw it; he got away with the charm; we tried to get him;— Oh, yes, that is just the idea; I will put it in the paper this afternoon."

CHAPTER IX.

A DETECTIVE APPEARS.

ABOUT nine o'clock that forenoon the sun came out clear and bright, and the fierce storm was at an end.

It had snowed all night, and at daylight there was not a track to be seen that had been made by any of the actors in our romance.

This had been highly gratifying to the cashier and his friend, and they congratulated each other when they met at the bank, as they had also done before then when they had come out of the house where they had spent the night.

"The snow favored us grandly," the cashier observed.

"Yes, it did indeed," affirmed the head clerk. "It could not have done better if we had had the storm furnished to order."

This was when they met at the bank, as stated, and they had made it their business to be there just a little earlier than usual.

"Have you counted the money you have?" Fairweather inquired.

"Yes; I have just nine thousand of it."

"Then you got more than half of it, eh? Well, no matter, you put four thousand and two hundred of yours into the safe, and I will put in three thousand and two hundred of mine, and the account will be squared. The rest of it we will hold on to for future contingencies."

They were the only ones yet present, and the money was soon counted out and put into the safe, thus making their standing all right, so far as that part of their misdeed was concerned.

They had no thought of the other and greater crime they had been obliged to commit in order to cover up the first one.

There was only one thing that troubled them, and that was the knowledge that the cashier had lost his watch-charm somewhere during the night, and that it might turn up to face them at any time. Their *alibi* was so good, however, that they could almost laugh their fears away.

When Deepwood arrived at his office, on this same morning, the first thing to force itself upon his mind was the fact that the office had been broken open during the latter part of the night. Everything had been in order when he had closed up.

It did not take him long to find out what had been the object of the invasion, and he was not by any means displeased to get his own coat and hat back again!

Tom, the message-boy, was with him, and the boy seemed to be particularly delighted, though the agent could not tell whether he was glad that his, the agent's, coat had been returned, or that the other had been taken away.

Tom drew his satisfaction from the latter source. Now he was in possession of the only

clew, so far as he knew, and he meant to work it "for all it was worth."

The case had been made known promptly to the officers of the company, and the first train down from the city brought with it a detective to investigate the matter, and, if possible, to bring the guilty ones to account.

This detective was a keen-eyed man, and Tom looked upon him with something of a feeling of awe. It was the first real live detective he had ever seen, and we must confess that the boy was a little disappointed. The man had the right kind of a face, he thought, and his eyes were certainly keen enough; still, he looked very much like other men. There was nothing about him to indicate that he had revolvers in his pocket, if he had; nor would any one ever suspect that he had a supply of handcuffs hidden anywhere about his person.

"So you are a detective, are you?" he thought, as soon as the agent had let him into the secret. "Well, no one would ever suspect it if he didn't know, that is sure. It will be the same way with me. No one will suspect that I am working on the case, and I will have all the fun I want all to myself. I'll run a race with ye, Mister Detective, and we will see who will come out ahead."

The officer had arrived in the guise of a drummer. He had a big sample-case with him, and as Tom had said, no one would ever surmise that he was a detective.

His first business was to interview the agent. He had not made himself known to any one else, and had no intention of doing so.

Entering the office after the train had gone on, he entered into conversation with Deepwood, and when the chance came when they were alone, made himself known and opened the business.

"Have you any clew for me to start with?" he asked.

"None whatever," was the reply.

"Nothing left here by the men, eh?"

"Nothing now. One of them did leave an old coat and hat, which I put away in that closet, but when I came around this morning, I found that the station had been broken open and the old hat and coat were not to be found. In their place I found my own, which one of the men had put on to fool the messenger, as you know."

"Did you feel in the pockets of that old coat, to see if there was anything in them?"

"No, I did not think of that."

"That is bad. Perhaps you missed a good clew. Now have you any suspicion as to who either of those men was?"

"Well, I had a suspicion, but perhaps I had better not mention it. That person may be entirely innocent, and it would be a great wrong to him to point the finger of suspicion at him."

"You must tell me that, by all means. I can look into the matter on the quiet, and if there is nothing in it the suspected one will never know that he has been under my eyes. You can do no harm by telling me everything, and you may do a great deal of good."

Deepwood thought the matter over long and carefully, and was at a loss to know what to do. When he looked back over the events of the night, however, and recalled how strongly impressed he had been that one of the men was the bank cashier, he resolved to let the suspicion be known.

"Well," he said, after a little thought, "I will tell you that I suspect one Clifford Fairweather, the cashier of the Lawrenceburg Bank of this place, and son of the president of the same institution."

"Whew! is that so? Why do you suspect him?"

"I thought I recognized his voice."

"Then you are well acquainted with him?"

"As well as I am with any other business man in the town. We are not friends, however, nor by any means intimate. I do not say that it was he, you understand; I am merely giving you my suspicion. The two men were certainly not ignorant men, though they tried to appear as such. Their good use of language gave them away at times."

"Ha! that is something to keep in mind. Did they let fall any word that you could make anything out of as to where they were from? Whether citizens here or strangers?"

"No, nothing to be relied on. They spoke once about getting out of town as soon as they could after they had accomplished their task."

"And yet they came back and took away the coat and hat? That seems to say they were not going far away, and were afraid to be seen in your coat, and were afraid to let the other one be found here."

"Then you think that they were citizens?"

"Yes, I think so, but one can never be sure of anything in this sort of work until he has made assurance doubly sure. Have you mentioned your suspicion to any one else?"

"Of course not."

"That is good. It will give me a good chance to work it in the dark. Now do not let it out that I am a detective, for that might put a hundred obstacles in my way, and hinder my work. I will try and learn something about our friend the cashier to-day, and prove him innocent or guilty."

So their interview ended, and the supposed drummer went over into the town and put up at the best hotel.

When the afternoon paper came out there was a full account of the robbery given, and in another place appeared the following:

"FOOTPADS IN TOWN."

"At an early hour last evening, while Mr. Clifford Fairweather, the gentlemanly cashier of the Lawrenceburg Bank, and Mr. Robert Bitherford, head clerk of the same establishment, were on their way from the home of the latter on Kingston street to a boarding-house on Warren street, where they were going to sit up with a sick friend, a man sprung out upon them from the shadows and made a grab at Mr. Fairweather's watch. Fortunately he did not succeed in getting away with the watch, but he did tear off the pretty charm that was attached to the chain. The two young men gave chase, but the fellow got away from them. It is to be hoped that the officers of this town will wake up to their duty and make a clean sweep of all such characters."

As soon as the papers were out the cashier's loss was known to every one who read the daily news in that little—and not very little, either—town.

In another part of the paper a reward was offered for the return of the charm, in case any one happened to find it.

Franklin Deepwood read the account of his own case, and then as he ran his eyes over the other parts of the paper he found the other items.

This set him to thinking. Surely if Fairweather had been sitting up with a sick man on the previous night, it was not he who had committed the robbery. He would lay this point before the detective.

As soon as he dropped the paper, message-boy Tom grabbed it up, for he was as anxious as any one to read the account of the robbery, and how he and his sister had stopped the train. It was indeed quite a readable article, but lack of space forbids repeating it here.

Suddenly the boy exclaimed:

"Hello! Cliff Fairweather had his watch-charm snatched off by a feller last night. I wonder if it was one of th' same fellers that came here and done you up in such great shape?"

This was an idea that had not come to Deepwood. It certainly was reasonable, since it was now pretty sure that he had been greatly mistaken in thinking one of the robbers was the cashier.

"Very likely you are right," he answered.

Late in the afternoon when the Express train went up on its northern trip, and Tom was on the platform, he caught sight of the charm that Conductor Oldhouse had on his chain, and recognized it instantly.

It was certainly the charm that the cashier had so lately lost, or else it was one exactly like it!

Tom had noticed the cashier's chain and charm many a time, for he, too, had been a frequent caller at the Hildreth home; and the boy knew that he was not mistaken.

"Say," he boldly demanded, "where did you get that charm?"

"What is that to you?" was the surly counter-question.

"If you found it, I know who it belongs to," Tom declared, without paying any attention to the other question.

The conductor was interested at once, and drew the boy aside.

"I found this charm," he said, "and if you tell me whose it is, and will say nothing about it, I will give you five dollars."

"That is a fair bargain," said Tom, "and I take you up. Trot out your V, and I will unload the owner's name to you."

CHAPTER X.

TOM BOBBING FOR POINTS.

CONDUCTOR OLDHOUSE certainly believed that this information would be worth the sum he had named, and a great deal more, too.

Was it not a clew to the identity of the robbers? and by it was he not in a fair way to be able to unravel the whole mystery? Certainly such information would be dirt cheap at five dollars.

Taking out a five-dollar bill, he held it in his hand while he asked another question.

"I suppose you are sure of what you claim to know, and there is no guess-work about it, is there?" was what he asked.

"It is a dead sure thing," Tom assured.

"Very well, then, here is the money, and now tell me the name of the owner of the charm."

Tom took the bill and stored it away in his pocket, and replied:

"The name of th' feller that owns that thing is Clifford Fairweather, and he is the cashier of the bank over there in the town."

"Great Scott! you don't say so."

"You heard what I said."

"Oh, but that is impossible," the conductor argued, speaking more to himself than to the boy.

"Not a bit it ain't," insisted Tom. "You just read this," and he handed him a paper, pointing to the item that mentioned the cashier's loss.

Oldhouse took the paper and read the item, and immediately threw it down with a startling oath.

"What is the matter?" the boy asked.

"There is matter enough," was the fierce answer; "you hand that bill back to me, or you will see what is the matter, and that in short order."

"Well, I reckon not," cried Tom, springing away; "didn't I tell ye what I bid ter tell? If you haven't got th' worth of yer money it is no fault of mine. I held to my part of the bargain, an' I mean ter hold to your part part, too; namely, ter wit, this little fiver."

"You hand that money back to me, you little pup, or I will wring your neck."

"If I was you I wouldn't do it," retorted Tom, as he kept well out of reach, "for it was a fair deal, an' th' money is mine. It was yer own offer, anyhow."

"The boy is right," said a young man who at that moment stepped out between them from around the corner of the station; "I happened to be a witness to the whole bargain."

This young man, as the boy instantly recognized, was the detective that had come up from the city to take charge of the robbery case.

"Who are you?" the enraged conductor demanded.

"I am a stranger here," was the calm reply, "but I am a man who always likes to see fair play. Your bargain with this boy was perfectly clear, and he kept his part of it to the letter, and you have nothing to say."

If the conductor had had more time he no doubt would have had more to say on the subject, but as it was high time for him to be going, he had to let the matter rest where it was.

"I will settle with you, my boy," he called out to Tom, as his train rolled out of the station, "and that in a way that you won't relish."

"When you want any more information," Tom called out in answer, "you just come around and let me know. I will give you all you want at the same price."

It was certainly a little rough on the conductor, from his point of view, for he had hoped, that once he knew to whom the charm belonged, he would have the straight clew to the finding of the robbers. But now he saw that it amounted to nothing. The charm had been stolen from the cashier, and it was very likely that the one who had taken it from him was the one who had robbed the messenger. This being the case, the clew was of no value whatever toward finding that person.

When the train was gone, the detective entered into conversation with the boy, thinking, of course, that Tom had no idea who he was.

"What about that charm you and the conductor were having the dispute over?" he inquired.

"Nothin' much," Tom replied, "only I happened to see it on his chain, and I told him that I knowed whose it was. Then he said if I would tell him he would give me a V. I told him, after I had got hold of the bill, and then, 'cause th' name didn't suit him, or somethin' like that, he got mad and wanted his money back. But nary a get back. I earned th' money fair an' square, an' it is mine."

"Yes, it is yours, fast enough; but, where did the conductor get hold of the charm? Whose is it? And what was the item that you showed him in the paper? It was that that seemed to set him off."

"Say," the boy counter-questioned, "I thought you heard all that was said between us? If that is th' case, how is it that you don't know nothin' about it?"

The detective laughed.

"You are wide awake, I see," he said. "Well,

no matter; what I was coming at was to see that item you showed him in the paper and learn what it contained that cut him up so."

Tom gave him the paper, and the detective read the item with interest. Here was something for him to puzzle his brain over. The charm had been taken from the cashier on the previous night. Now here it was on the chain of a man who had just come from the very end of the road, nearly a hundred miles. How had that charm come into his possession? There was some great mystery about all this, and no doubt the conductor held the key to the situation. He would have to interview him.

Here were three persons, even four, who were viewing the same thing in different lights. As all this has been set forth in proper order there is no need to repeat.

The more the detective thought about it, however, the more light (?) he got on the subject. His suspicions had been directed to the young cashier. He had been trying to learn where he had been on the previous night, and with considerable success. It was plain that he had been sitting up with a sick friend, just as the paper said he was on his way to do when robbed of the charm. Now if the person who had taken the charm and the one who had robbed the messenger were one and the same, could it be possible that this conductor had been a party to the crime? There was one suspicious circumstance, as the detective looked at it, and that was the fact of his not warning the messenger on the train about the intended robbery, even after he had been warned himself by Tom and Martha Hildreth.

He held quite a little talk with Tom, but Tom was sharp enough not to let him get hold of any of the points he was holding for his own use.

"By the way," the detective said, as they were about done their conversation, "it would be a good joke, now, for you to go and tell that cashier that you know who has his charm."

"You are right," the boy exclaimed, "and then let him come down here and tackle him about it. Mebbe he will accuse him of stealin' it. That would be rich."

"That would not work, though, for the conductor was not in the place at the time when it was taken."

"Of course not, but it would be fun, just the same. Mebbe he could give th' cashier a pint or two so's he could find th' thief, though."

"Yes, that is so. It might put another V in your pocket."

So they parted for the time, and while the detective went into the office to see Deepwood, Message-boy Tom set out to go over into the town.

Tom knew what he was doing, and did not ask any help from any one. He had the only clew to the robbery, so far as he knew, and was determined to push the investigation secretly.

The little book that he had taken from the pocket of the old overcoat belonged to a man whom he knew perfectly well. That man was one Dayton Redbush, who was employed in a livery stable in the town. The book had his name in it, and an account of various jobs of extra work the man had done.

Tom was now to interview this man.

Going around to the door of the stable he went right in, for he was well known there, and the first man he saw was Redbush.

"Hello, Day," he exclaimed, "how goes it?"

"That you, Tommy?" was the response;

"what brings you 'round here?"

"Oh, I came along this way, and thought I would run in an' see if you had got yer fine cutters oiled up fer this snow. I may want one some evenin' ter take out my best girl. Got any new ones in stock?"

"You are the same Tommy, I see," the man laughed, "and who ever heard tell of oilin' a cutter? You must have carriage on th' brain, I guess. You wait till you are a few years older, Tommy, and you shall have th' best rig that this shebang can trot out, and that is straight fact."

"All right, I'll hold ye to yer bargain on that, you see 'f I don't. But, what is the matter with ye? You look as if you had lost yer best friend. Was ye out all night in th' storm?"

The boy's eyes were alive to business as he put this question, for it was just possible that this was one of the robbers, though in his heart he did not believe so, for he had known Redbush for a long time, and had never had reason to think him anything but an honest man. Nevertheless, the book he had found in the old overcoat certainly belonged to him, and he must find out how that coat had come to be in the station, or at any rate how the book had come to be in the coat, if the coat was not his.

The man showed no signs that the boy could think were signs of fear or guilt, but the boy was not an expert, as he felt. Instead, he answered in the calmest way that may be imagined.

"No," he responded, "I was not out at all last night, but had a good solid nap from ten o'clock till six this mornin'. What I am gruntin' about now is a little book that I can't find."

Tom felt himself trembling with suppressed excitement.

"What sort o' book?" he asked.

"Why, a little 'count book that I carry with me fer handy."

"Mebby ye left it home."

"No, I did not have it home. I left it in my overcoat, or at any rate, I think I did, but I can't find it now."

"Where did you leave your overcoat? Didn't you wear it home?"

"No, not that one. It is a rough one that I wear round here, or when I am going out in bad weather. Th' book was in one of th' pockets, that I am sure of, but it ain't there now, an' I would like to know where it has got to."

"You must have put it in the other coat," suggested the boy.

"No I didn't, fer I took it out of th' pocket of that coat an' put it in th' old one afore I went home. If I didn't put it in there I don't know where I did put it; but I am dead sure that I put it there."

"Then it must have had help to get out, that is sure," Tom averred.

"That is th' way it looks to me. Between you an' me, I think that some one had my old coat out last night after I left here, fer it was more or less wet when I kem 'round, an' it wasn't so when I went home. Some one has made use of it, an' if that book is lost an' I find out who it was, he won't hear th' last of it in a hurry, that he kin 'pend on."

Message-boy Tom was fairly boiling with excitement.

CHAPTER XI.

TOM STRIKES OIL.

TOM had no reason to think that the man was telling anything but the truth, and Tom had known him long enough to be able to understand him pretty well.

"Who do you think can have used it?" the boy questioned.

"I give it up. I asked Tom Jones, my partner here, you know, if it was him, an' he said no. An' I don't think it was, fer he went home afore I did, and was not out all night. It must ha' been some one of them dudes that has horses here."

"Horses to board, you mean?"

"Yes."

"What would they want of 'em?"

"Oh, they may have been out on a lark. None of th' hosses has been out o' the stable, though."

"Do any of 'em have keys to the stable?"

"Yes, two of 'em has keys to that little back door there."

"Who are they?"

"Ginger! boy, you ask as many questions as a lawyer."

Tom laughed to pass it off.

"I am always ready ter help you out with any sort o' knotty problem that ye get hold of," he declared, "an' I am tryin' ter help ye out with this one."

"Yes, boy, an' that is all right. Th' ones that has keys is Cliff Fairweather an' Charlie Harper. They are both lively boys when they git onto a lark. I'll have ter bone 'em about it when they come around."

For the first time the boy's attention was drawn to the young cashier in a way to connect him with the robbery. Could it be possible that he had had anything to do with it?

It was too great a problem for the boy's untrained mind to grasp at once.

"It couldn't been the cashier," he said, "for he was settin' up with a sick friend all night."

"How do you know that?"

"Th' paper says so. Didn't you see th' account of his bein' robbed last night on his way there?"

"No."

"An' didn't ye hear about th' big robbery over at th' station?"

"Not a word. I have been right here all day, and there hasn't been hardly a person around. What was taken from th' cashier, an' what from th' station?"

"Little fishes! but you are away behind th'

times!" the boy exclaimed. "Here, let's set down here, an' I will read th' account of it to ye."

The two sat down, and the boy proceeded to do as he had agreed. And as he read he looked up now and then to watch the effect of the news upon his listener.

Redbush listened attentively, and was deeply interested in the story of the Express robbery.

"Ginger!" he exclaimed, when the boy was done, "but you an' that sister o' yourn did a good piece o' work there. You are somethin' of a hero, an' no discount on that. But, what about th' other case?"

Tom read that too.

"Mebby it was the same gang that done both deeds," the man commented.

"That is what some of us think," the boy owned.

No mention was made in the article of the coat that had been left at the station, nor of the second robbery there, so the stableman was not made aware of the part his coat had played.

"By th' way," Tom asked, "was there any signs to show that some one was in here durin' th' night? Was there any snow on th' floor?"

"There wasn't any snow on th' floor, but there was plenty of wet marks, as if there had been snow there. You begin ter make me think that there has been a robbery here too. I'll have ter look around, an' mebbly I will find more than my book missin'. I can't understand about th' coats bein' wet, though."

"The coats? Was there any other coat besides yours there?"

"Yes; one of Tom's seemed to be about as wet as mine."

"Mebby they traded with ye," the boy suggested, "and when they found that they had the worst of th' bargain, they came and traded back again."

This was said in a joking manner.

"Come," Tom added, "and show me the place where the coats were, and I will try my hand at detective work. What reward will you give me if I find that book for you?"

"I'll give ye a dollar, spot cash," was the offer.

"All right. I'm your pippin, every time. If you want to, I'll bet you another dollar that I do return your book to you, too."

"You are jokin'."

"Nary a joke. I am on th' make to-day."

"Well, I take you up. You will either lose a dollar or make two."

"Just so. Now let's see th' place where th' coat hung. Shouldn't wonder if we could find somethin' there."

The stableman made light of the boy's earnestness, but led the way to the other end of the stable, and there pointed to the place where the coats were hanging.

"There they are," he indicated.

Tom looked at the two coats, and felt sure that he recognized one of them as the one that had been left in the station.

This was all he cared for so far as the coats were concerned.

"Say," he observed, to his companion, "have you felt in the pockets of the other coat? It is like enough that you put your book in there by mistake."

This was reasonable enough.

"Yes," was the reply, "I thought of that, and I went through them all. It was no go, however."

"Found nothin' else, eh? That is, nothin' that might tell who it was that had th' coats out?"

"Nothin'."

This was what the boy was getting at, and he saw that there was no further clew to be had from the pockets of the two garments.

His interest ended in that direction, he looked around the floor.

There the first thing to attract his attention was a fragment of some red substance, which he picked up quickly.

"What is that?" inquired Redbush.

"Don't you know?" and Tom held it up for him to see.

This was the best test yet to see whether he knew anything about the robbery or not, and as the boy held the object of his discovery up for him to look at it, he had his keen eyes fixed upon his face. But he saw nothing there to arouse his suspicions. The man looked at the object calmly for an instant, and responded:

"No, hang me if I do."

The object was a fragment of wax, and one bearing the impress of the seal of the Express Company, or a portion of it. It was a happy find.

"Then I will have to tell you what it is, and I want to have a little understanding with you,

too, about a little matter of business. Don't see nothin' more layin' around here, do ye?"

There was nothing more to be found.

"Come over here an' set down, then," Tom invited, "and I will let you into a little secret."

Wondering what the boy could be coming at, the man followed him, and they went back to the place where they had seen seated before and sat down.

"Now," Tom began, "lend me your ears. To begin with, the same fellers that took your coat and lost your little book are th' ones that got away with th' sixteen thousand dollars last night."

"Sho! you don't say so."

"Yes, but I do."

"How do you know it?"

"By this little piece of sealin'-wax that I hold in my hand. Just pay attention, and I will disclose th' hull thing to you. That is ter say, I will let you into th' secret if you promise not to let it out to any one else till I am ready to have it let out."

"Ginger! are you a sure-enough detective, boy? No matter, though, I will keep my head shut about it all."

"All right, I'll take your word for it. Now do you recognize this little book?" and as he spoke the boy drew the lost account-book from his pocket.

"Ginger teal!" Redbush cried, the plain ginger not being hot enough to express his feelings this time; "where did you get that?"

"You see I won the bet, and can claim th' reward besides."

"Yes, but you was bettin' on a known sure thing, an' that wasn't fair."

"Well, we won't fight about that, Day, an' you kin keep your dollar. All I ask of ye is ter keep still."

"I'm mum."

Tom went ahead then and told him all about the finding of the coat in the station, and how he had thought to feel in the pockets of it and finding the book. This and more he related, taking the stableman into his whole confidence in the matter.

"You see," he concluded, "th' facts o' th' case are jest these: Th' two men that robbed th' Ex. Co. first came here and borrowed your and Tom's coats and hats. They then went to th' station, where one of 'em changed with the agent, an' when they had ter run away they had th' agent's coat an' hat with 'em. That would never do, an' they kem back an' traded back again. Then they kem here an' changed back again with you an' Tom, as it were, an' it was here that they opened th' money package an' no doubt shared up th' boodle. Now th' question is, who were those fellers?"

"I give it up," said Redbush, promptly.

"Well, that is jest th' work that I have got on hand, an' I want you to keep as mum as a clam till you hear from me again. If I make a good job of it an' there is any reward forth-comin', I won't forget you. Will ye keep still on it?"

"That I will, lad."

"You see," Tom went on, "I told th' agent that I was goin' ter take hold of th' case an' see what I could do. He only laughed at me, an' now I want to show him that boys don't always count fer nothin'. You jest keep still as you have promised, an' see if I don't bag th' game. There is a reg'lar detective here in town, an' I would like ter come in ahead o' him by about a length. It would do me more good than a big dinner, an' that is sayin' a good deal."

"That is jest what you want ter do, lad, an' if I kin help ye in any way, you let me know, an' I will be right with ye."

"All right, Day, mebbly I will have ter call on ye afore I git th' thing off o' my hands. At any rate I will want you to stand proof ter what I have found out so far, an' that will be a big help on my side. I was a lucky dog in gettin' hold o' that book o' yourn, fer that was what brought me here."

Their conversation ran on to some length, but nothing of further importance to us was brought out, and by-and-by Tom took his departure and returned to the station, where he found considerable work awaiting his arrival.

CHAPTER XII.

THE TRAIL GROWS WARM.

ALONG in the afternoon, Clifford Fairweather and Robert Bitherfurd were at their posts in the bank, happy in the thought that their accounts were square, and that they had considerable cash in pocket, when a ragged little boy entered with a note addressed to the cashier, and marked "Strickley pryvate."

The boy made sure of the identity of the

cashier before he delivered the note, and then he hastened away without waiting for any reply.

It was with considerable of wonder that the cashier broke the seal and drew forth the dirty sheet the envelope contained.

When he had done so, however, and had read the message it bore, his face grew pale, and he appeared decidedly nervous.

The note ran as follows:

"MISTER FAREWETHER:—Wee wud lik tue se you doun at jim white's saloon at nine o'clock tonite, you and rob bitherfurd. doan't fale tue be thear, for what we want tue se you for is vary impoartint. wee know a thing or tue, and you will have tue come doun, with some spondulix tue keap us still. it woant be well for you not to come, so keap that rite in mind.
Yours troly,
"BEN VORRIS & JAKE BINLEY."

Little wonder that the cashier was startled.

Under the note, on the remaining half of the sheet, was a rude drawing of a solid stone structure, under which were the words:

"STATE'S PRISON."

Fairweather did not dare to let Bitherfurd see the note there and then, for he knew that it would upset him so, that he would be likely to draw attention to them. Instead, he penned a few words on a slip of paper and handed it over to the head clerk, requesting him to keep right on at his work after the closing hour, until the other men had gone home.

Bitherfurd read the note and nodded assent, and their business went right on without any one suspecting that the communication was anything outside of the regular course of business.

Time rolled on, and the hour of closing came. The other employees finished their work and went away, one after another, but still the head clerk and the cashier remained at their desks, and they did remain there until they were alone.

As soon as the last man was gone, Fairweather turned to Bitherfurd and said:

"The merry dickens is to pay."

"What do you mean?" Bitherfurd demanded.

"Read this," and the cashier handed him the note he had received.

The head clerk took it and read, and when he had come to the end he sunk into a chair as limp as a rag.

"We are lost!" he gasped.

"Not by a good deal!" declared Fairweather.

"We have plenty of money, and we will buy their silence for a time until we can take care of them in some other way."

"What do you mean by some other way?"

"Just what I say. It will not do to let these men come to the fullness of their days, holding as they evidently do the keys of State's Prison over us. It would not surprise me greatly if they were to come to a sudden end in some mysterious way."

Bitherfurd shuddered.

"That is one more step into hades," he gasped, "and I will not take it."

"It is that or prison," warned the cashier. "These men, if they have got any hold upon us, will run us to death for money, and in no time we will be in a deeper hole than we were before. There is no stopping where we are now. We must do for them or they will do for us. We must take care of them, you know how I mean, or else we shall have to look to prison or suicide as our only release from them. We are too far in to turn back."

The head clerk groaned dismally.

"It will be one or the other with me," he declared, "for I will go no further in this thing. Last night we thought we would settle the whole thing and clear ourselves nicely, and here we are ten times deeper than ever before."

"You give in too easy," the cashier reproved. "We do not know how much these men know, and we may be able to defy them. We will meet them, and then we shall know just how we stand. It will not take us long to settle the matter one way or the other. If we find they have got the deadwood on us, as the boys say, we will buy them up for a time, and then I will take steps to silence them forever. This is a game to the death, and it would be foolish for us to let them overrule us. No, sir; if you are too weak to hold of the case I am not, and I promise you that they shall not have the upper hand of us very long."

"Then you intend to meet them to-night?"

"Of course I do, and you must come with me. We will meet them on cooler terms than they evidently look for, and unless they show a strong hand, we will defy them. We have too good an alibi for them to overturn it very easily, and it is barely possible that we can

even put the crime upon them. Where are two fellows who would be more likely to enter into such a robbery, and who would find it harder to shake off suspicion, if once we could pin it upon them?"

"You are right there, for they are hard cases, but do you think it would be possible for us to put it on them?"

"That remains to be seen. We will meet them as they request, and then we will play the game out according to their lead. It is a blind deal, and we are as likely to hold trumps as they are."

This sort of talk cheered the head clerk up, and in a little while the two young men locked up the building and went home, agreeing upon a place and hour of meeting when they parted company.

The above interview took place some little time before the interview between Tom Hildreth and Dayton Redbush.

By the time Message-boy Tom got back to the station it was getting dark, and as we have said, he found considerable work awaiting him.

Among other things he found a message to be delivered to one James White, a saloon proprietor in the town, regarding the shipment of some liquor.

The boy had two or three other messages to deliver, and considering this one about the least important of the lot, concluded to go around there last.

As soon as this was done he would be at liberty to go home.

Deepwood, the agent, wanted to know where he had been so long, and Tom replied that he was playing detective, and that detectives could not always be found in their offices.

This was said in a playful manner, and the agent told him that he had better attend to business first, and to his play afterward.

"That is all right," retorted Tom, "but you will open your eyes when you see me bring that pair o' robbers up with a round turn, you bet. I am after them, hot foot."

"Well, get along hot foot with those messages, and then you can play detective all you want to. I feel sorry for the regular detective, with you opposing him, and you ought to be willing to share the honor with him."

This was said in such a sarcastic way that Tom had to laugh.

"I will think about that suggestion," he answered, "and perhaps I will do as you say."

Tom was thoroughly in earnest, and if Deepwood could have known what he knew it is very likely that the agent would have made less light of his ambition.

One thing that troubled Tom not a little now, was the fact that he would be expected home between six and seven o'clock, his usual time, and that he would not be allowed to return to town after that if his father was home, as he undoubtedly was.

This would give him little chance to play detective.

If he could only find some one going that way so that he could send word that he would not be at home that night, it would be all right. The folks would think that he was stopping with some chum, as he sometimes did, and he would be free to do as he had a mind to.

These thoughts were in his mind as he went around to deliver the telegrams he had in hand, and while he was in a store, where he went to deliver one of them, who should come in but a farmer who lived about a mile beyond the Hildreth place.

Tom addressed him at once, and requested him to stop on his way home and tell the folks that he would not be home that night.

This the farmer promised to do, and the young detective was happy.

He had now delivered all but one of his messages, and that was the one addressed to James White, the saloon-keeper.

This saloon, which was a saloon and restaurant combined, did not bear a very savory reputation, though it was greatly patronized by many honest men of the laboring class. On the other hand, it was a rendezvous for all the hard cases of the town, and it frequently happened that there was a free fight within its walls.

Tom made his way to that saloon with the same confidence he would have displayed in entering one of the most respectable business houses of the town, and delivered the message, and was about turning away when the smell of chowder attracted his attention. The boy was hungry, and chowder was just the dish to hit him favorably.

"I must have some of that," he thought, "even if this is Jim White's place. I guess it won't do a lad o' my age and size any hurt to

eat here, so long as I expect to pay up honest for what I eat."

Tom knew well enough that there would be an hour of reckoning, if his father came to hear of it, but the smell of the chowder was too tempting, and going away back to a table at the rear end of the saloon he called for plate of the odorous mixture, and other things to make up a pretty solid repast, for Tom was no small eater.

While the boy was eating, two men entered the saloon and sat down at a table just ahead of him, calling for beer to drink.

Tom knew them, and knew little good of them. They were Ben Vorris and Jake Binley.

The boy paid no attention to them, and one glance at him satisfied them that they had nothing to fear from him. Tom was going into the chowder at a great rate, and had no time to bother with such characters as these. Besides, he wanted to get done and out of the place as soon as he could.

The two men began to talk in low tones, evidently thinking that the boy could not overhear them even if he felt inclined to try, but Tom's ears were very sharp, and presently he heard something that claimed his attention.

"Do you think Fairweather will come?" one asked the other.

"You bet he will," was the response. "He is not fool enough not to come and see what we want."

Tom's heart beat like a frightened rabbit's. Could it be possible that these were the men who had robbed the Express Company and that the cashier of the bank had had something to do with it? This would account for their being able to get into the stable, if Fairweather had let them have his key. From that instant he was all attention and eager to hear more.

"Mebby he won't want ter come here, though," reasoned the first speaker, "fer he might not want ter be seen here."

"Then let him send us word to meet 'em somewhere else."

"Yes, that is what he kin do, sure enough."

The young detective was so excited that he could hardly sit still, and he made up his mind that here was a promised chance to learn something and he must not miss it.

CHAPTER XIII.

GETTING DOWN TO BUSINESS.

TOM paid close attention to his plate, and seemed to be no more interested in the two men than though they had not been there at all.

As soon as he was done he paid his score and went out, his mind busy trying to fix upon some plan of action. This was new business to him, and he could not be expected to know just what to do in every turn of situation.

About all he had learned was that the two men expected Fairweather and one other man to meet them there at nine o'clock. From that he had to arrange his own plans.

It was yet early, and he had nothing to do but while away the time.

He thought of his partner, Dayton Redbush, the stableman, and decided to go and visit him. Perhaps he could give him some good advice. He did not like to take any one into the game with him, but as this man already held his secret, he would go to him.

He went first to the stable, but Redbush had gone home, so he went on to where he resided.

The man was just eating his supper, and he gave Tom a hearty welcome, pressing him to draw up to the table and eat. This Tom could not very well do, after all he had so recently eat, but he sat near the stove and waited for his friend to get through.

When the man had done, the boy said:

"Day, I want you to come with me on a little errand of business, if you will."

"Some message to take out o' town, eh?" the man observed, speaking his thought aloud.

"All right, I will be with you in no time." Tom did not deny nor affirm the interrogatory, but let it stand just as it was uttered. It would be a good excuse to the man's wife for his absence.

Redbush was not long in getting ready to get out, and telling his wife not to sit up later than nine o'clock for him, he and Tom left the house.

"What is in th' wind?" the man asked as soon as they were out.

"What do you think of Ben Vorris and Jake Binley?" Tom asked.

"They are none too honest," was the reply; "why do you ask?"

"What would you say if I told you that they are the ones who had your coat out last night,

and that they are the ones who robbed the Express?"

"I would say jest as like as not. Do you think it was them?"

"Yes, I do; and I am sure that Cliff Fairweather is in it some way or other, too. That would account for their gettin' into th' stable."

"That is so."

"Well, I want you to go with me to see if we can't fix th' deadwood on 'em. I have found out that they expect to meet Cliff at nine o'clock at Jim White's place, an' there is somethin' in th' wind, you can bet on that."

"And what are we ter do if we do get proof on 'em?"

"I will take care of all that. We will be two witnesses to whatever they have to say, an' after we git th' proof I will put th' matter in th' hands of th' right party an' have 'em pulled in."

"An' what shall we do now? We must git onto all th' pints of their plan we can."

"Well, s'pose we go right down to th' saloon, an' you go in an' see if they are still there. If so, we will lay in wait fer th' others."

"All right."

This settled, they went on their way.

They had not gone far, however, when Tom suddenly caught hold of his friend's arm and drew him to a stop.

"What is it?" the man asked.

"Look there."

Tom indicated where, and the man following the direction in which he pointed, saw Clifford Fairweather and Robert Bitherfurd just coming down another street, toward the one they were on, and Tom had caught sight of them over a vacant lot at the corner.

Tom and his friend started on at once, in order not to draw attention to themselves, and at the corner they came face to face with the other two.

"How d'ye do, Redbush," the cashier saluted; "how is Dolly?"

Dolly was the cashier's horse.

"She is all right," was the reply; "why don't you try her in this snow?"

"Perhaps I will, to-morrow afternoon," was the response; and the young men went on.

Tom and his friend too continued on their way for a short distance, and then the boy stopped.

"I'll tell you what," he exclaimed, "you go on to th' saloon, Day, an' see if th' two men are there yet, an' if they are, you stay there till you hear from me, or th' men come away. If they leave, you foller 'em. I will go back an' shadow th' other two."

This was quickly settled, and they parted.

Redbush hastened to the saloon, entered and looked around for a few minutes, and came out.

He had found that the two men were still there.

Crossing the street, he took a position on the porch of a closed store to wait and watch.

In the mean time Tom had hurried on after the cashier and the clerk, and was not a great while in bringing them in sight.

He was playing detective now with a vengeance, and this was his first work as a shadower.

From all that he had read he thought that it would be easy enough to follow these two young men without their suspecting him, but he was to learn that there were many points he did not yet understand. One fault was, he was following them too closely, and he had not stopped to consider what he would do in case they happened to turn and discover him.

This was just what happened. They presently came to a sudden stop and turned, starting back in the way they had come. This brought them face to face with their youthful shadower.

Tom was surprised, and came to a full stop.

This was about the worst thing that he could have done, for it was sure to bring the suspicion that he had been following them. If he had been a little older in the business he would have forged right ahead, taking no notice of the men when he passed them.

Tom saw his mistake instantly, but he was quick of wit, and saw his way out of the difficulty at once.

He stood his ground till the two came up to him, and then he addressed them.

"You two are purty lively on th' walk," he said, "fer I have been tryin' ter come up with ye ever since I left th' last corner."

"What d'ye want?" demanded the cashier.

"You had a watch-charm stolen from ye last night, didn't ye?" Tom asked.

"Yes," was the answer, "I did; what do you know about it?"

"I know who has got it."

Both were more than interested now

"Who has it?" Fairweather asked.

"Brynton Oldhouse, the conductor on th' Night Express," Tom informed.

The cashier could not hide the shock this gave him, and the boy plainly saw that it hit him hard.

"How do you know he has it?" was the demand.

"I saw it on his chain this afternoon."

"Does he know whose it is?"

"Yes; I told him that I knowed whose it was, and he gave me five dollars to tell him."

"Do you know where he got it?"

"No. He got up on his ear and went off in a huff, so I didn't find out anything about it."

"And why did you want to tell me?"

"Land o' goodness! didn't you have a notice in th' paper about it? When I see it an' knowed whose it was, why shouldn't I tell ye?"

"Could you see him and ask him for it for me?"

"Well, I don't know about that. You see, he got mad when he found out it was yours, an' threatened my scalp. We do not speak as we pass by now. You had better see him yourself."

"When could I see him?"

"He will come down to-night on the Night Express."

"Well, perhaps I will run over to the station and see him. I am very much obliged to you, Tommy, for telling me. How is Martha, after her experience of last night?"

"Oh, she is all right."

"Please deliver my best regards to her, and tell her she is a brave girl."

"Cert. Well, good-night, fer I must be goin'."

"Good-night."

Tom started on, and the two young men went on their way.

"That was a close shave," the boy muttered, as he pushed on, "and I must be a little more careful. I guess there is a good deal about detective work that I shall have to learn before I will become a second Pinkerton. They would had me this time fer sure, if I hadn't thought of a way out of th' fix. Wonder if he will go an' tackle Oldhouse about that charm? I would like to be on hand if he does."

The boy knew full well that it would not do for him to be seen by the two young men again, so he did not attempt to follow them further, for fear of another discovery.

Instead, he made his way down to the place where he thought he should find his partner, Redbush.

He went down on the side of the street opposite to the saloon, and when he came to the place where the closed store was, Redbush hailed him.

"Hello, there you are, eh?" cried the boy, and he joined him at once.

"Where you been?" the man asked.

"Been makin' a fool o' myself, 'bout as near as I kin come at it," was the reply.

"How is that?"

"Why, I let them two fellers ketch me."

"Whew! that was bad. What did you tell 'em?"

Tom told his partner all about his little adventure, and then inquired:

"Are th' other fellers still there?"

"Yes, they are there," was the answer, "and I am keepin' watch of th' place, just as you said."

"That is right; but really I don't see how we are goin' ter manage this thing. S'pose them fellers comes here, how be we ter hear what they have ter say?"

"I have been tryin' ter solve that riddle myself, an' can't do it. We shall have ter trust ter luck, I guess."

"I guess you are right. Well, it will be somethin' ter know that they do hold a meetin' with th' two rascals, fer that will be another link in th' chain. We may be able ter get hold o' p'int enough ter fasten th' thing onto 'em. If we can do that, it is all I hope ter do. I want ter show Deepwood that I am no slouch as a detective."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE NIGHT INTERVIEW.

MESSAGE-BOY TOM and his comrade found their vigil a rather cold and trying one, but they had fully made up their minds to stand it out, though it seemed as though nine o'clock would never come.

A great many persons passed in and out of the saloon, but they saw nothing of Clifford Fairweather and Robert Bitherfurd.

Ben Vorris and Jake Binley had not come out,

however, so it was clear that as long as they remained there it was not useless to watch.

At last the hour of nine drew near.

Presently two men were seen coming down the street, and Tom was the first to recognize them as the two for whom they watched.

"Here they come," he whispered, "and now for it, hit or miss."

"They are crossing over to this side," whispered Redbush in return, "and there is a boy with them."

"Sure enough!" exclaimed Tom. "Let us draw as fur back inter th' shadders as we can, and we must not breathe out 'loud, or they will find us out."

The two watchers drew back out of sight into the doorway of the store, and remained as silent as though they had been frozen stiff.

Fairweather and Bitherfurd, with their boy companion, crossed over to the side the watchers were on, and stopped at the steps of the store.

"Now," said the cashier, addressing the boy, "you go over there to White's and see if Ben Vorris and Jake Binley are there. If they are, you go up to them and tell them that the men they are expecting are over here on this porch, and tell them to come over here at once. Here is the quarter I promised you, and now see that you do your work well. As soon as you have told them you may go, for that is all you have to do. Do not let any one else hear what you say to them."

"All right, sir," said the boy, and taking the quarter he put it into his pocket and darted away.

He crossed the street to the saloon and disappeared within its doors, soon coming out and starting away up the street in the direction he had come.

A moment later Vorris and Binley emerged from the place, looked around for a moment, walked away up the street for a little distance, then crossed over and came back to the closed store.

There Fairweather and Bitherfurd were ready to receive them, and Tom and his companion crouched back in the shadows so as not to be seen, thanking their star of good luck that things were turning out so favorably for them.

"We thought you would not fail ter come," said Vorris, he being the first to speak.

"We received your mysterious note this afternoon," acknowledged the cashier in the coldest possible tone, "and not knowing what in the world you were driving at, we thought we would come and see you. Your note was rather threatening in its tone, and I want to warn you that you had better be careful how you make threats. Now please state your business just as quickly as you can, for we have no time to fool away with you."

Vorris and Binley both laughed.

"We thought you would not fail ter come," Vorris repeated, "fer we knowed that ye wouldn't dare to. We know what we are talkin' about, an' so do you know what we are talkin' about, an' th' sooner you come right down off o' that high horse an' come ter reason, th' better fer ye."

"It is plain to me that you have made some sort of mistake," said the cashier, in still more freezing tones, "and unless you come direct to the point, and that at once, we will have no more to say to you. What did you send for us for?"

"There is no mistake about it," declared Vorris. "You would not 'a' come here if you hadn't knowed just what we want, that is sure. Th' dog that gits bit is th' dog that bollers, every time. We sent fer ye ter get a little boodle out o' ye, that is th' long an' th' short o' th' thing."

"You want money, eh? This is a sort of blackmail scheme, is it? Well, now, you just hold your hands in your pockets till you get it. What is your little game? You may as well let it right out, and then we shall understand one another."

"We understand well enough as it is. You know what you two fellers done last night, an' we was witnesses to th' hull thing."

Bitherfurd could hardly stand, but Fairweather nerved himself to the defense.

"You talk in riddles, my man," the cashier declared. "I fail to understand what you are talking about at all. I and my friend here were sitting up all night with a sick man, as we can prove, and I cannot understand what you mean. Please to make yourself plain."

"You mean ter say you don't want ter understand," growled Vorris, now getting out of patience. "I will tell you in few words jest what we mean. Me an' my partner here was down by th' stable where you keep your hoss at

a late hour last night, an' we seen you two fellers come there an' go inter th' stable. We wondered what you could want there at sich an hour, an' we waited ter see. When you kem out you had on other hats an' coats, an' you both set out fer th' railroad station. We follered ye, an' we seen all that took place. We could 'a' helped that young feller out o' your hands, but we had a better thing in sight. We thought we would let you finish your work, an' then we would fall onto ye fer our share. Now you have either got ter pony up a thousand dollars apiece for us, or we will let out what we knows."

The cashier laughed, though he felt little like it.

"You are two fools," he declared. "Who do you suppose would believe such a story as that? It is much more likely that *you* are the ones who took the money, and I cannot see what your object can be in bringing us into it, unless you found some sort of papers that you are afraid to try to pass. I shall turn the detectives' attention to you the first thing in the morning."

"You don't dare to!" was the defying retort. "Don't I? Wait and see! We can prove where we were last night, all night, and unless you can do the same it will go rough with you."

This seemed to be a sticker. Perhaps these rascals, too, had a record of their own of the previous night that would not bear the light of day, and the weapon they were using would cut both ways. If such was the case, however, they were as sharp as the others, and held their own well.

"We kin prove everything we done," Vorris declared, "and we kin prove more that you done. When you kem back to th' station, after th' fellers had run ye off, ye broke it open an' went in an' got back one of th' old coats that ye had taken from th' stable. Then ye went back to th' stable an' changed fer yer own. Then ye went to th' house of yer sick friend, and that were th' last we see'd of ye. Now you kin pony up, or we are ready ter blow out on ye."

The young rascals were in a tight place, and they knew it. It was well enough to bluff and bluster, but they knew well enough that these two men were witnesses against them, and that they knew what they were talking about.

They knew not what to do. Bitherfurd was as weak as a rag, and was of no use whatever. It all fell upon Fairweather to defend them.

"If you are in earnest in what you say," the cashier reflected, "it is certainly a case of mistaken identity. We were not in any of the places you name last night, except the house of our sick friend. We were not out of there till near one o'clock in the morning, when we came out for something to eat. You see your story does not hold water as well as it ought to."

"There is one little p'int we forgot," acknowledged Vorris, "but we won't let it slip our minds ag'in. That is th' fact that you did go fer somethin' ter eat afore ye went to th' house after th' robbery."

"It is no use," the cashier defied, "for we can prove where we were during every hour. No one in this town will pay any attention to your story, for they know us too well. You had better look out that you do not get your heads into trouble. You seem to know too much about that robbery not to have had a hand in it. I think I will put the detectives onto you, anyhow. No one is more interested about that robbery than I am, and if you have any sort of clew to the matter, even if you are innocent of it, I think you had better show it up."

"Very well, if you want it that way you kin have it so," was the retort, "and you will see how it will come out. If we don't put you in th' trap it will be funny. Why, that agent over there would know by our size and shape that we wasn't th' ones, while he could pick you out of a thousand when he seen you fixed up th' same way ag'in. Now you know we have got th' screws on ye, and there is no use in yer tryin' ter git out of it. We didn't go inter this thing ter lose, an' we counted all this up afore we started. Now if you want us ter tell what we know, all right; if not, jest come down with th' rocks."

"We may as well give in," faltered Bitherfurd, "for they have got the whole thing just as it happened."

Desperate as their situation was, the cashier could have killed his partner in crime for these words. There had been a possible hope that he would be able to bluff the two men off, but now that hope was gone.

The other two men laughed heartily. Now they surely had the thing in their own hands.

"Ye may as well come ter terms," admon-

ished Binley, "fer we have got th' bulge on ye in th' very wu'st kind of way."

There was now no chance of getting out of it, so something had to be done, and that without further parley.

"It is true that we were out on a little lark last night, at about the hour of the robbery," admitted the cashier, "but we are not th' robbers. However, in order to keep our own lark from coming out until after this robbery case has been cleared up, we are willing to give you a hundred dollars to hold your tongue for a time."

"Not a cent less than a thousand!" exclaimed Vorris, with energy.

"You won't get it," declared the cashier. "If you are not satisfied with what we are willing to pay, you can whistle and do your worst. Come on, Rob."

Despite the blunder that Bitherfurd had made, Fairweather might have forced a compromise, but the head clerk again put his foot into it, and in such a way that there was no room for further delay.

"You can do as you please," he said, addressing the cashier, "but I am going to pay the money and have the matter settled."

Again did Fairweather rave at him, but it did no good, and this was the turn that placed them hopelessly into the power of the witnesses to their crime.

"What agreement do you make with us, if we pay you the sum you demand?" asked Fairweather. "Remember that if we defy you and let you do your worst you will not get anything at all, so you want to be reasonable."

"You give us each a thousand dollars, and we will keep th' thing still fer one year."

"Agreed," said the cashier. "I will give you a hundred now on account, and will pay you the rest in one month."

"No, sir; it must be cash down or nothin'."

"Let us pay it," urged Bitherfurd, "and have it done with. If I stay here ten minutes longer I shall die."

Ten minutes more saw the compact sealed. Each of the young men turned over a thousand dollars to each of the witnesses, on the sworn agreement that they would keep the secret and not trouble them in any way for one year. Then they parted, and in his mind the young cashier vowed that before the year was out he would be the only living witness.

CHAPTER XV.

BEGGARS ON HORSEBACK.

AS soon as the men were gone, Message-boy Tom and his partner came out from their hiding-place, and Tom grasped his friend's hand and gave it a hearty shake.

"Who would have thought it?" Redbush exclaimed.

"It does beat all," agreed Tom, "but we have got th' deadwood on 'em this time, fer sure. There is no way fer 'em ter squirm out, an' tomorrow I will put on th' screws an' bring 'em ter time. Now I want you ter hold th' secret well, Day, fer if they get any idee of what is in th' wind they will light out."

"Oh, you needn't be afeerd o' my tellin' 'em," the man earnestly declared, "fer that would spoil th' hull game."

Tom invited himself to spend the night at Redbush's house, which was readily approved of, and thither the two repaired.

In the mean time the regular detective had gone up the road to another station in order to meet the Night Express and come down with Conductor Oldhouse.

Ten o'clock found him on the platform waiting for the train, which presently came along a little behind time.

The detective got aboard, and after the train had started on and he had been visited by the conductor, he sought out that official and opened conversation with him.

He, the detective, was disguised, so that the conductor would not be likely to recognize him as the one who had taken the part of the message-boy that afternoon.

After asking a number of questions, the detective allowed his eyes to rest upon the watch-
charm the conductor was wearing, and with a look of surprise he exclaimed:

"Why, where did you get that?"

"Why do you ask that?" the conductor counter-questioned.

"Because it is just like one that was stolen from a friend of mine last night. Pardon me; I do not mean to say that it is the same one, you know."

"What is the name of the person from whom you say one like it was stolen?"

"His name is Clifford Fairweather."

"That is all right. I asked, to make sure whether you were not trying to get hold of it for some purpose of your own."

"Oh! not at all."

"It may puzzle you a little to guess how I could get hold of it so soon, and I a hundred miles away from here last night."

"Yes, it is a little mysterious."

"I will tell you. I found it."

"Where?"

"On the platform of the Lawrenceburg station, where we encountered the two robbers last night."

"Indeed! I heard something about that case. Do you think that the person who took it from the young man was the one, or one of the two, who robbed the Express?"

"That is the way it looks."

The detective kept the ball rolling for a long time, in the hope of drawing out something that would throw more light upon the matter, but failed utterly. There did not seem to be any more light to be had in that direction. The conductor did not seem to present any signs of guilt, as having been a partner in the affair, and the fact of his having found it right at Lawrenceburg excluded the hope of its leading to the identity of the robbers.

The conductor did not ask him to take it to the young cashier, as the detective had feared he would, after his saying he was a friend of his; and of course the detective did not ask him for it.

When the train came to Lawrenceburg, and just as the detective was about to alight, he caught sight of Fairweather standing on the platform.

It would never do for him to let the conductor see that he did not know him, so he quickly crossed over to the other side of the train and got off on the side away from the platform.

He did not hurry away, however, but stood to learn what would pass between the two men.

The cashier hastened up to the conductor and said:

"Are you Conductor Oldhouse?"

"Yes," was the brief reply.

"My name is Fairweather," the cashier went on. "I understand that you have found a watch-charm that belongs to me."

"Who told you that?" the conductor demanded.

"Why, little Tom Hildreth, or Message-boy Tom, as we call him, of this station."

"Oh, he did, did he? Well, yes, I have found such a charm as you have lost; is this yours?" showing the one on his chain.

"Yes, that is it."

"Well, you may have it if you will pay me five dollars. I am out just that sum on account of it."

"I will pay it, and gladly. Here, take it. It is worth that much to get the charm back again. Thank you. Now you will pardon me if I ask you where you found it?"

"Certainly. I found it here on the platform last night, where the robbers met us and got away with the Express money."

"It is just as I thought, then," the cashier declared. "The one who robbed me must have been one of the two who robbed the Express."

"That is my opinion, too," agreed the conductor. "Well, I must be goin'. All aboard! Good-night, young man."

"Good-night," returned the cashier, and as the train pulled out he turned his steps toward the town, being joined by young Bitherfurd.

The detective, being in disguise as we have said, followed them over to the town, taking no care not to make his presence known. His suspicion as to the guilt of the cashier was fast losing its hold upon him. The young man certainly did not act like a guilty man, and it was pretty certain that he could account for his whereabouts on the previous night. So far as he, the detective, had been able to investigate, it was plain that he had spent the night with his sick friend, as claimed.

If the detective could have had more time, there is no doubt but he would have got to the bottom of the matter, but Message-boy Tom had the inside track in the race, and the morrow was to be a day of surprises all around.

When they came over to the town the detective went one way while the other two went another, and as soon as he was out of their sight the former discarded his disguise and went to the hotel.

Fairweather and Bitherfurd continued on toward their home.

"You see," Fairweather remarked as they walked along, "outside of those two men who spotted us last night, we are perfectly safe. There is no one in the world that would suspect

us of such a thing, and we have covered our tracks so well that there is no danger of discovery."

"Yes, it is all very well," the other agreed, "except what is all very wrong. The very fact that those two men know our secret, place us over a slumbering volcano. We are likely to be exposed at any moment."

"Oh, they will hold their tongues, I think, for they will be looking for further hush-money. If they will keep their heads shut for a few weeks they will be out of danger of the dogs by that time, I promise you that."

"Well, I hope they will keep to their word, but I am afraid that they will get on a big drunk, and let out what they know."

"You have hit the nail right on the head," cried the cashier.

"What do you mean?"

"You have showed me the way out of our fix. Those two rascals have a thousand dollars each, and they are likely to have a big time, just as you say. They will spend money right and left, and it will not be long before they will have attention called to them. People will wonder where they have made their raise, and when they begin that we can drop a note to the Express agent, in a secret way, drawing his attention to them. The detective will be after them in no time, and ten to one we shall see them suffer for the crime."

"That is all right, but what about us when they tell their story?"

"We can laugh at them. We can prove where we were on that night, and their story will be only a waste of breath."

"You give me a ray of hope, Cliff, and no mistake. I hope it will turn out as you say."

"There is only one danger that I can see ahead," the cashier observed.

"And what is that?"

"That is you. You will weaken again, no doubt, at the first cry of danger. I vow I'll choke you if you do, and you can keep that in mind."

"No, you have seen me weaken for the last time. I see now how necessary it is to put on a bold front. Let come what will, you can count on me."

"Well, I hope so."

So they talked on, and presently parted for the night.

In the mean time there was a big circus down in White's saloon. Ben Vorris and Jake Binley had returned there, and they were making things hum. They had no end of money, and they were letting it flow as freely as water.

Fortunately for them they had sense enough not to let it be seen how much they had, but it was known that they were well fixed, as the saying has it, and they had made much display of several ten-dollar bills.

Everybody in the place was invited up to the bar again and again, and the two smart fools were the idols of the hour. A score of men who would not have noticed them an hour before now lauded them to the skies.

"Rah!" cried Binley, "set 'em up again. Come, boys, every one of ye, an' take yer pizen like men. Call fer what ye want, an' it is free gratis fer nothin'."

"Bully boy!" yelled the crowd, and again they surged to the bar.

Then as soon as this "round" was passed, the same cry would be heard from the other fool—Vorris.

The happiest man there was the proprietor. He cared not where the money came from, so long as it flowed into his till. He had been taking the bread from wives and children too long to feel any sting of conscience.

When the two men, and many others, were getting pretty well loaded, then the proprietor called the two aside and whispered a word of warning to them.

He saw there was plenty of money around, and he knew best how to insure his getting a goodly share of it.

"Now, boys," he said, "you don't want to take any offense at what I am going to say to you, for I am saying it all for your own good. You seem to have plenty of money, and I would advise you not to get cornered. You may not get home safe if you do. Besides, there has been a big robbery in this town lately, and it will never do for you to be suspected. You want to keep shady for a long time. Mind you, I don't want to say that you got your money by any foul means, oh, no; but you know you do not want to have any long noses poking into your business. This is only said in a friendly way, you see."

It was said in a most servile and patronizing way, and was well taken. It had the effect to

almost sober the two rascals, and their money ceased to flow at once, they vowing that they had reached the end of their fun for that night.

CHAPTER XVI.

TOM WEARS THE LAURELS.

MESSAGE-BOY TOM was on hand at the station at his usual hour the next morning, and went about his work as though nothing had happened.

Along in the forenoon his friend Redbush came over, and they had a private talk about their plans of action. Tom had it all mapped out. He saw that the right way to handle the case now was to put it into the hands of the regular detective.

He had no idea of doing this in any secret way, however, and thus give the man a chance to claim all the honor. He rather liked the detective, after the way he had taken his part on the previous day, and was willing to take him into the game with him. He did not mean to surrender his own honors, however.

Redbush agreed that his idea was about right, and presently, when the agent was not busy, they went into the office, and Tom brought the matter up.

"You remember what I told you the other night about that robbery case, don't you?" he inquired.

"No, I can't say that I do," Deepwood answered.

"I told you that I was goin' ter take a hand in it."

"Yes," said the agent, laughing, "I remember that."

"Well, I have brought the thing to a focus, and have got the deadwood on the robbers."

Deepwood could hardly believe that he heard aright.

"You don't mean it," he ejaculated.

"You can bet it is just as I tell ye, an' no discount."

"What has this man got to do with it?"

"He is my partner in th' case. We will put out our sign soon—Hildreth and Redbush, private detectives."

"But, are you sure of what you claim?" asked the detective.

"Yes, sure pop. Ain't it so, Day?"

"It sartainly is," Redbush affirmed.

"And who are the guilty ones?"

"They are Cliff Fairweather and Rob Bitherfurd."

Deepwood jumped up from his chair.

"I knew it!" he cried. "I would have staked a fortune on it, but I had no proof to bring against them."

"Well, we have, then, and loads of it," declared Tom.

"And where did you get your clew?"

"I found it in the pocket of that old coat that was left here in the station," the boy explained.

"The dickens you did!"

"Sure. You thought I would not amount to anything as a detective, an' I was goin' ter show you about that. Here I have got th' bull thing down fine, and th' reg'lar detective hasn't got started yet. You see I had th' bulge on ye. All that has to be done now is ter scoop in th' game."

"But, what do you know, and how did you find it all out?" the deeply interested agent demanded.

Tom went ahead, then, and told him the whole story, to which Deepwood paid the closest attention, and could not conceal the surprise he felt at the clever way in which the boy had done his work. It had certainly been a big success, and he saw that Tom had won all the honors.

"You have done well, Tom," he complimented, "and I must say that you will spring a big surprise on the detective. What is your plan of action now, you young Pinkerton?"

"Well, I told you this thing so that no one could steal th' honors away from me. Now I want you to send for that detective and let me tell th' same thing to him, and then he can take hold of th' case and bring in th' game. He is a good feller, I think, and as you advised me to do, I am willin' ter share up th' honors with him."

Deepwood had to laugh.

"Well," he answered, "you go over to the hotel and find him, and tell him that I want to see him at once, and you come back with him."

"All right, I'll have him here in less'n no time."

The boy set out, and was soon at the hotel. There he found the man he was in search of, and accosted him thus:

"Say, mister, th' agent over there at the station says he wants you to come over there as quick as you can get there, an' quicker too."

"All right, lad," was the response, "I will go right along with you."

Tom led the way back to the station, and entered the office with his man.

"You sent for me?" the detective asked.

"Yes," answered the agent: "allow me to introduce Master Tommy Hildreth, the Allan Pinkerton of Lawrenceburg."

"What?" the detective demanded, looking down at the boy in surprise.

"The Allan Pinkerton of this town," the agent repeated.

The detective could only look from one to the other of those present in great surprise. He did not dare to say anything for fear of disclosing something he should not, and he was in a dilemma.

The agent had to laugh.

"This boy," he explained more fully, "has solved the mystery of the robbery, and has discovered who the robbers were. He has worked up the whole case, and all that remains to be done is to make the arrests."

The detective was dumfounded.

"Can it be possible?" he said doubtfully.

"It is not only possible, but true," the agent affirmed. "Tommy, tell your story."

Tom did so and told the whole thing from beginning to end, and when he had done the detective grasped his hand and shook it warmly.

"You are bound to make a detective, if you follow it up," he declared. "You have done a wonderful stroke of work. An old hand could not have done better, though perhaps he could have improved it a little in some of the details. But you have got there just the same, as the boys say, and that is the main thing."

"Now I want you to take hold of it and bring the thing to a head," announced Tom. "I guess I have gone about as far as I can in the matter."

"Very well, I will do so, and that without delay. You shall have the honor for all that you have done, however, and when the thing is published in the papers, as it surely will be, I suppose you will be the happiest boy in seven counties."

It would be useless to say that Tom was not proud, for he was, but he took it all as coolly as he could.

The detective lost no time in getting about his work, and within an hour the two minor rascals, Ben Vorris and Jake Binley, were lodged in jail.

They were badly scared at once, and wanted to make an exposure, but the detective would not listen to it. He had other work to do, he said, and did not want any help from them whatever.

This arrest was kept perfectly quiet, and that afternoon, when the city bank closed for the day, the detective was on hand to arrest the major villains.

Fairweather and Bitherfurd came out with all their usual airs, but they had not taken a dozen steps from the building, when heavy hands fell upon their shoulders, and they found themselves in the grasp of two constables, while, in a moment more, the detective had snapped handcuffs on their wrists.

Two more surprised men were never seen. They could not say a word at first, but the cashier soon found his tongue, demanding to know the meaning of the outrage.

The head clerk, however, broke down and wept like a child.

It was a sad fall for them, but it was their own fault. If they had not taken the first step in crime, no such fate could have overtaken them.

Their warrants were read to them, and then they were hurried away to the jail, where they found the witnesses to their crime awaiting them.

That afternoon, when the papers came out, there was a most interesting item of news for the public to read, and Tom Hildreth was the hero of the hour.

It had certainly been a clever piece of work on his part, and he deserved all the praise he got.

Dayton Redbush, too, came in for a share of the glory, for Tom declared that he had done a good share of the work.

As for the detective, he claimed none of the honor whatever, but freely admitted that only for Message-boy Tom, he would still be on the trail.

When the cases came to trial nothing could

save the men, and in spite of all the efforts their fathers made, both of the proud young fellows had to don the convict garb and go to the State Prison for a number of years.

Their whole lives were ruined. There was no happy future for them—only the curse of a shadowed name and ruined hopes.

The path of sin may seem fair at first; it usually is, and the fruit may be sweet to the taste, but the end is always in the valley and shadow of moral death.

The path of right may be steep and narrow, and hard to climb at first, but it is the only road to honor and usefulness.

Keep to the way that is narrow and straight, and your reward is assured.

There are two persons in our story who have not played very active parts all the way through, as it was not intended they should, and these are Franklin Deepwood and Martha Hildreth.

The parts they did play were certainly important enough, but it remained for Message-boy Tom to finish the work and win the laurel.

They played the leading roles in another scene, however, some time later, when there was a grand wedding at the Hildreth home-stand. Phil and Tom were there on that occasion, and there was a grand and happy time. Now the agent has a home of his own, over which Martha reigns as queen, and there is a private wire running from the station to the house, by means of which they can speak to one another at any time.

Tom is still there, and he can now telegraph too, and has been promoted to the office of operator; the agent having enough of other work to do to occupy his full time. And so we take our leave of him, sure that he will grow up to be an honorable and honored man.

THE END.

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- 383 The Indian Pilot; or, The Search for Pirate Island.
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- 393 Seawalk, the Boy Lieutenant.
- 402 Isodor, the Young Conspirator; or, The Fatal League.
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- 435 A Cabin Boy's Luck; or, The Corsair.
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- 454 Wizard Will's Street Scouts.
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- 474 Flora; or, Wizard Will's Vagabond Pard.
- 483 Ferrets Afloat; or, Wizard Will's Last Case.
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- 530 The Buckskin Bowers.
- 535 The Buc skin Rovers.
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- 570 Camille, the Card Queen.
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- 591 Delmonte, the Young Sea-Rover.
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- 147 Will Wildfire, the Thoroughbred.
- 152 Black Bess, Will Wildfire's Racer.
- 157 Mike Merry, the Harbor Police Boy.
- 162 Will Wildfire in the Woods.
- 165 Billy Baggage, the Railroad Boy.
- 170 A Trump Card; or, Will Wildfire Wins and Loses.
- 174 Bob Rockett; or, Mysteries of New York.
- 179 Bob Rockett, the Bank Runner.
- 183 The Hidden Hand; or, Will Wildfire's Revenge.
- 187 Fred Halyard, the Life Boat Boy; or, The Smugglers.
- 189 Bob Rockett; or, Driven to the Wall.
- 196 Shadowed; or, Bob Rockett's Fight for Life.
- 206 Dark Paul, the Tiger King.
- 212 Dashing Dave, the Dandy Detective.
- 220 Tom Tanner; or, The Black Sheep of the Flock.
- 225 Sam Charcoal, the Premium Dandy.
- 235 Shadow Sam, the Messenger Boy.
- 242 The Two "Bloods"; or, Shenandoah Bill and His Gang.
- 252 Dick Dashaway; or, A Dakota Boy in Chicago.
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- 289 Jolly Jim's Job; or, The Young Detective.
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- 305 Dashaway, of Dakota; or, A Western Lad in the Quaker City.
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- 353 The Reporter-Detective; or, Fred Flyer's Blizzard.
- 367 Wide-Awake Joe; or, A Boy of the Times.
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- 423 The Lost Finger; or, The Entrapped Cashier.
- 428 Fred Flyer, the Reporter Detective.
- 432 Invincible Logan, the Pinkerton Ferret.
- 456 Billy Brick, the Jolly Vagabond.
- 466 Wide-Awake Jerry, Detective; or, Entombed Alive.
- 479 Detective Dodge; or, The Mystery of Frank Hearty.
- 488 Wild Dick Racket.
- 501 Boots, the Boy Fireman; or, Too Sharp for the Sharper.
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- 41 Lasso Jack, the Young Mustang.
- 58 The Border King; or, The Secret Foe.
- 71 Delaware Dick, the Young Ranger Spy.
- 74 Hawk-eye Harry, the Young Trapper Ranger.
- 88 Rollo, the Boy Ranger.
- 134 Sure Shot Seth, the Boy Rifleman.
- 143 Sear-Face Saul, the Silent Hunter.
- 146 Silver Star, the Boy Knight.
- 153 Eagle Kit, the Boy Demon.
- 163 Little Texas, the Young Mustang.
- 178 Old Solitary, the Hermit Trapper.
- 182 Little Hurricane, the Boy Captain.
- 202 Prospect Pete; or, The Young Outlaw Hunters.
- 208 The Boy Hercules; or, The Prairie Tramps.
- 218 Tiger Tom, the Texas Terror.
- 224 Dashing Dick; or, Trapper Tom's Castle.
- 228 Little Wildfire, the Young Prairie Nomad.
- 238 The Parson Detective; or, The Little Ranger.
- 243 The Disguised Guide; or, Wild Raven, the Ranger.
- 260 Dare-Devil Dan, the Young Prairie Ranger.
- 272 Minkskin Mike, the Boy Sharpshooter.
- 290 Little Foxfire, the Boy Spy.
- 300 The Sky Demon; or, Rainbolt, the Ranger.
- 334 Whip-King Joe, the Boy Ranchero.
- 409 Hercules; or, Dick, the Boy Ranger.
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- 422 Baby Sam, the Boy Giant of the Yellowstone.
- 444 Little Buckskin, the Young Prairie Centaur.
- 457 Wingedfoot Fred; or, Old Polar Saul.
- 468 Tamarac Tom, the Big Trapper Boy.
- 473 Old Tom Rattler, the Red River Epidemic.
- 482 Stonewall Bob, the Boy Trojan.
- 562 Blundering Basil, the Hermit Boy Trapper.

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- 23 Nick o' the Night; or, The Boy Spy of '76.
- 37 The Hidden Lodge; or, The Little Hunter.
- 47 Nightingale Nat; or, The Forest Captains.
- 64 Dandy Jack; or, The Outlaws of the Oregon Trail.
- 82 Kit Harefoot, the Wood-Hawk.
- 94 Midnight Jack; or, The Boy Trapper.
- 106 Old Frosty, the Guide; or, The White Queen.
- 123 Klowa Charley, the White Mustang.
- 139 Judge Lynch, Jr.; or, The Boy Vigilante.
- 155 Gold Trigger, the Sport; or, The Girl Avenger.
- 169 Tornado Tom; or, Injun Jack From Red Core.
- 188 Ned Temple, the Border Boy.
- 198 Arkansas; or, The Queen of Fate's Revenge.
- 207 Navajo Nick, the Boy Gold Hunter.
- 215 Captain Bullet; or, Little Topknot's Crusade.
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- 279 Old Winch; or, The Buckskin Desperadoes.
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- 356 Cool Sam and Pard; or, The Terrible Six.
- 366 Velvet Foot, the Indian Detective.
- 386 Captain Outlass; or, The Buccaneer's Girl Foe.
- 396 Rough Rob; or, The Twin Champions of Blue Blazes.
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- 521 Dodger Dick's Best Dodge.
- 523 Fox and Falcon, the Bowery Shadows.
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- 552 Dodger Dick's Desperate Case.
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- 573 The Two Shadows.
- 582 Dodger Dick's Drop.
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